

Rise 101

Chapter 101: The Prefectural Exam

"You are so annoying, always waking me up!" The enchanting woman on the bed extended her delicate hand out of the blanket, rubbing her sleepy eyes as she complained.

When the girl opened her dark eyes, she noticed Zhu Ping'an was already dressed and ready to leave. He hadn't brought along his usual odd cloth bags or that broken wooden board. His hands were empty, carrying nothing, which piqued her curiosity.

"Why are you going out empty-handed?" the girl asked curiously.

"The prefectural examination is starting. I'm going to take the exam. I left a hundred wen on the table; you'll need to take care of your three meals for the day. Be careful when coming and going," Zhu Ping'an instructed, turning back briefly before heading out.

"Why aren't you taking anything to the exam?" The questions from the girl on the bed kept coming. "Aren't you the one they call the gluttonous Zai Yu? And why aren't you even bringing a pen to the exam?"

"The prefectural exam is different from the county exam. We are only allowed to bring an examination admission slip, nothing else. The examination hall will provide everything," Zhu Ping'an replied calmly.

"Oh, bring back the top scholar title!" The girl on the bed said with a playful smile as she looked at Zhu Ping'an.

"Top scholar, my foot. This is just the prefectural exam!" Zhu Ping'an muttered, speechless, as he closed the door and went downstairs.

In the main hall, his uncle and several other scholars had risen early. They had set up a lavish spread of food and wine, stopping every familiar examinee to encourage them with pride and a sense of importance. Zhu Ping'an also received his uncle's rare encouragement, though it was clear that his uncle's words were not entirely genuine.

Zhu Ping'an joined the crowd heading toward the examination venue. The streets were bustling with people, and the commotion was endless. Anqing Prefecture had even deployed numerous yamen officers and soldiers to maintain order on the streets.

The prefectural examination venue was noticeably better than the county exam's. It was a large mansion with a plaque reading "Anqing Provincial Examination Hall." At one-quarter past the hour of Mao (early morning), the gates opened. Under the guidance of yamen officers and soldiers, the candidates formed four lines according to their admission slips and underwent thorough checks. Anything other than the admission slip was strictly forbidden inside the gate.

Outside the gate, Zhu Ping'an didn't spot any fellow scholars from his hometown. However, he did see Xia Luoming and others from Tongcheng, whom he had encountered a few days earlier. Xia Luoming and his group appeared confident, their glances toward Zhu Ping'an carrying a hint of competition. After a brief exchange of greetings from a distance, they each joined their respective queues and entered the gate in turn.

Inside the gate, the candidates were led by four yamen officers holding lanterns to four separate examination halls. At the entrance of each hall was a simple cloth curtain enclosure where every candidate was subject to a meticulous inspection before entering.

Zhu Ping'an waited in line and entered the curtain for his inspection. Inside, four soldiers conducted the checks. Candidates had to remove their shoes and socks and open their clothing for inspection to ensure nothing was smuggled in. Even the linings of garments were scrutinized. Fortunately, inner garments were allowed to be worn and only checked briefly, sparing some embarrassment.

After entering the examination hall, candidates were guided to their seats, which were small, isolated spaces just big enough for a desk and a chair, with three walls and an open front. The seating arrangement was based on the candidates' county exam results. Zhu Ping'an was assigned a good seat, far from the toilets and kitchen.

Once seated, the necessary stationery and the exam papers were distributed.

The prefectural examination comprised three sessions. The first session tested the Four Books and Five Classics, lasting an entire day. This exam had two parts: the first required writing an eight-legged essay based on a topic drawn from the Four Books, while the second tested memorization and transcription of specific passages from the Four Books and Five Classics, with explanations of their principles.

Upon seeing the questions, Zhu Ping'an felt confident. The memorization and transcription were his forte, and he could recite the designated passages backward if needed. The essay question was also not particularly challenging; even though he had not practiced breaking down essay topics before, he could do so appropriately and effectively.

During the day-long exam, candidates were allowed three breaks, during which food and water were provided. The meals consisted of one meat and one vegetable dish, but the taste was subpar. There was no soup, only a bowl of plain water—barely enough to stave off hunger.

Zhu Ping'an went to the toilet twice during the exam. Each time, he had to ring a small bell beside his desk to request permission from the patrolling officers. Once granted, a staff member accompanied him every step of the way, regardless of whether he used the squat toilet or relieved himself. These escorts stayed close, seemingly unbothered by the smell.

At dusk, people began submitting their exam papers one after another. Zhu Ping'an carefully checked his completed exam papers once, then again, to ensure there were no omissions. Only after confirming this did he ring the small bell beside him. Someone came over to inquire about the matter, and upon learning he wished to submit his paper, two more people approached. One was responsible for covering the personal information on his paper with a sheet of white paper and placing the anonymized exam paper into a wooden box resembling a lunch container. The other gathered all the items on Zhu Ping'an's desk, including brushes, ink, paper, and inkstone, into a basket. Only then did the proctor signal for a yamen officer to guide Zhu Ping'an out of the exam hall. By then, the sun had already set.

As soon as Zhu Ping'an stepped out of the exam hall, he saw Tongcheng's Xia Luoming and others chatting happily outside. Noticing Zhu Ping'an exiting at this time, Xia Luoming and the others couldn't help but reveal a look of smugness.

"Brother Zhu, how did it go this round?" Feng Shanshui stepped forward and asked.

"I finished all the questions," Zhu Ping'an replied with a simple smile.

"If you've completed all the questions, then it's a sure success! Ha ha ha, allow me to congratulate Brother Zhu in advance for making it to the Jia list again," Feng Shanshui said with a smile and a cupped hand gesture.

"How dare I? I'd be satisfied just to make it to the Sun Shan spot," Zhu Ping'an replied with a simple grin.

To "fall behind Sun Shan" means to fail the exam, as Sun Shan refers to the very last name on the ranking list. By expressing this, Zhu Ping'an humbly indicated that he wasn't aiming for the prestigious Jia list but would be content just to make it onto the Yi list. After all, the prefectural exam was merely a qualification test for the provincial exam. Whether the performance was good or mediocre, as long as one secured a spot, it was enough. The provincial exam was the real centerpiece, so why rush for temporary glory?

"Ha ha, I dare to bet that Brother Zhu will surely achieve high marks on the Jia list this time," Feng Shanshui said with a wave of his folding fan, exuding a hint of Zhuge Liang's demeanor.

"Ha ha ha..." The others smiled without comment.

"I wouldn't dare hope for that. Ha ha. In any case, let me first congratulate you all on your success in advance. As for me, I can't bear the hardships of the exam hall, so I'll head to the inn to rest for now," Zhu Ping'an said, noticing they were obviously waiting for someone and not being familiar with them anyway. Thus, he politely took his leave to avoid overstaying his welcome.

"Ha ha ha, I bet Brother Zhu can't stand the food in the exam hall and is off to find some fine wine and delicacies," Feng Shanshui joked.

When the group heard Zhu Ping'an mention going to the inn to rest and Feng Shanshui's comment about him disliking the exam hall food, they couldn't help but recall Zhu Ping'an's nickname as a glutton and his reputation as the modern-day Zai Yu. One by one, they burst into laughter.

"Alas, Brother Feng has hit the mark," Zhu Ping'an replied, flashing a carefree and simple smile. Amid the laughter, he leisurely left the exam hall, leaving the group with a view of his retreating figure dressed in green.