

Rise 106

Chapter 106: Surprise

The night was as thick as ink, pitch black, with not a trace of light...

At this time, most people had already fallen into a deep sleep. A few rooms in the inn still had their lights on, one of which belonged to Zhu Ping'an, who was reading by the light of an oil lamp. On the desk, several books were neatly arranged, and Zhu Ping'an, holding a copybook, leaned slightly forward, closely reading by the dim light.

Outside, all was silent, occasionally broken by the call of a cuckoo, "Cuckoo, cuckoo..."

The vixen sleeping soundly in bed slightly opened her eyes, glanced at Zhu Ping'an, who was sitting calmly reading, then closed her eyes again and fell back into a deep sleep.

Zhu Ping'an, reading by the lamp, gave a slight smile at the corner of his mouth and immersed himself again in the copybook. The more he looked at it, the more he began to touch upon the "three flavors" in books, as the old fisherman had said. Though still vague, he could almost reach out and grasp them.

As the night grew deeper, all the lamps in the inn gradually went out, and the night fully took control of the world.

The next morning, Zhu Ping'an woke up much earlier than usual. He wanted to put the insights gained from last night's reading into practice and see how they fared, just like someone eager to take a new car for a spin.

The area by Taihu Lake was quiet and empty. The old fisherman from the other day, as if an NPC in a game, had only appeared once, like a one-time encounter in a dungeon, and he had never been seen again.

Spreading out a black wooden board, he dipped his brush into a bit of clear water, exerted a slight force on his wrist, and the brush's tip touched the board. At that moment, the brush seemed to come alive, almost as if it had a soul. It was as if a word could describe this moment: the brush seemed to have divine assistance. The characters that appeared on the black board seemed to take on flesh and bones, leaping onto the surface, almost alive.

That bottleneck was finally broken...

As the sun rose, Zhu Ping'an packed away the black board and bamboo brush holder, took out a hand-copied book from his bag, and sat down quietly by a large rock, flipping through it.

The next day, the routine was the same. When the boatman's cry for fishing echoed from afar, Zhu Ping'an put away the book and placed it into his slanted shoulder bag. He leisurely returned to the inn, only to be intercepted by his uncle and others on the way, urging him to go see the exam results. They had arrived early, and the list had just been posted.

His surviving fellow villager, however, did not continue his luck this time and had failed.

The failed fellow villager, in a daze, suddenly clapped his hands and, pointing to the list, stammered.

Zhu Ping'an felt a little worried about him, hoping he hadn't been too disturbed by the outcome.

"Zhi'er, tell your uncle your seat number again!"

His uncle, Zhu Shouren, said urgently, his excitement hard to contain.

"Yiyou," Zhu Ping'an repeated when he heard.

As soon as he spoke, the failed villager, who seemed to have recovered from whatever had shaken him, clapped his hands again, his mood clearly much better. "Now it's alright, I'm not alone anymore. An Ge'er can return home with me, hehe..."

"No seat on the B list, none on the A list either," Uncle Zhu Shouren said, stroking his beard with a tone of apparent regret. "Ah, Zhi'er, although you didn't make it this time, don't be discouraged. You've been on the A list every time in the county exams; you've done well, and it's rare. Wait for your uncle to go back and tutor you."

After speaking, Uncle Zhu Shouren sighed again, feeling emotional. "This time, it's up to the Zhu family. We have a heavy responsibility, but we won't let you down."

Two other fellow villagers, also in their teens, came to comfort Zhu Ping'an and the other villager, saying they would take him to Zuijun Tower for a drink that night.

"It shouldn't be like this. I did better this time than usual," Zhu Ping'an murmured to himself. At that moment, he glanced through the entire list. Indeed, his seat number wasn't on the B list, nor on the A list. It shouldn't have been like this; he had done better than usual in this exam.

"Hehe, usually, An Ge'er is so calm and composed, and I thought he wouldn't have any other emotions. This time, failing the exam, it's finally clear that An Ge'er has other expressions."

"An Ge'er, don't be like this. Everyone says such things when they fail the exam. Come, come, let us go drink together to ease our troubles."

Zhu Ping'an muttered to himself. His voice was low, but it was heard by those around him. Everyone tried to comfort him, though their words were not exactly pleasant.

Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others thought this was a normal reaction. They felt that the imperial examination had finally gotten on track, and they were somewhat pleasantly surprised.

Zhu Ping'an looked at the list, still puzzled.

The others continued to comfort him, then pulled him and another failed candidate from their hometown to go drink.

Just as the others were about to pull Zhu Ping'an away from the notice board, a commotion arose from the crowd. It turned out that the clerk who had just posted the list had put up a large red paper the size of a bowl in the center of the first ranking area. The red paper displayed the name of the top scorer for this round, the first-place candidate in the second exam.

The seat number on the red paper was Zhu Ping'an's seat number: "Yi You."

Time seemed to freeze. At this moment, Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others could hardly hide their disappointment and shock. It had already greatly surprised them when Zhu Ping'an made the first list, but they never imagined that after so much effort, he wouldn't just miss the top, but in fact, the first place would land in his hands. It was something they never even dared to dream of.

Zhu Ping'an was equally surprised. He never expected to win first place. Though he had prepared for a long time and was familiar with one of the questions, he still couldn't believe he'd come in first.

Although this first place was just a temporary top scorer and didn't carry much weight, and the real top scorer would be revealed after all three exams, this did not diminish the difficulty of earning that first place. After all, it was a competition among over three hundred selected elites who had gone through multiple rounds of screening.

This dramatic twist was hard for Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others to accept. Although they couldn't hide their disappointment, they still insisted on taking Zhu Ping'an to drink. They couldn't back out of their offer just because of this, after all, it would be embarrassing. However, their mood was not high, especially the failed candidate from their hometown, who looked even more displeased.

Perhaps it was the rivalry between scholars, possibly jealousy, or perhaps other more complex reasons that made Zhu Ping'an less favored by Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others.

Zhu Ping'an wasn't blind to the situation and politely declined. After his refusal, Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others didn't insist further and pulled the failed candidate with them toward the tavern, where it seemed they would drink through the night.

Meanwhile, Xia Luoming and the others from Tongcheng, who were gathered around, looked at the list with disdain and casually discussed:

"Although we don't know who 'Yi You' is, this seat is neither ours nor belongs to the top scorers of the other counties or the top ten we're familiar with. We can only assume he's just a lucky fool who happened to get fortunate."

"Gentlemen, do not be discouraged. This is only a preliminary judgment. It holds the smallest weight in the three exams. The Four Books, Eight Legged Essay, and policy discussions are what truly determine the final result."

"Indeed, well said..."

As they spoke of Zhu Ping'an, the so-called lucky fool who hit the jackpot, he had already quietly left the announcement site and was heading down the street in search of some delicious street food.