

Rise 108

Chapter 108: The First Place in the Provincial Examination

Before and after the provincial exams, Zhu Ping'an's life remained much the same—he would rise early to practice writing and read in the morning, review and study the eight-legged essays during the day, and read by the lamp at night, coldly observing the other scholars' post-exam conversations about poems, wine, and tea...

The vixen in his room also behaved the same as always, smiling all day long, never giving him a moment of peace.

When the sun rose for the third time, Zhu Ping'an returned from his morning reading and was once again surrounded by his uncle and the enthusiastic locals to head over and see the announcement of the provincial exam results. This time, it was the final ranking for the provincial exam. The results were posted as a "long list," which combined the scores from the last three exams, ranking all the successful candidates by their names. The top scorer would be called the "provincial first," with the first thirty names listed on the A-list, and the next seventy on the B-list. In total, one hundred candidates would pass, out of the more than nine hundred who participated, making the pass rate about ten percent.

Whether on the A-list or B-list, all those on the list would be granted the title "Tongsheng," meaning they no longer had to take the county or provincial exams again, only the academy exams.

The crowd was dense, with groups of scholars gathered, some nervous, some confident, and some resigned, discussing their thoughts on the exam. After a brief period of mixed emotions, the sound of firecrackers filled the air, and two rows of red-robed yamen officers arrived, beating drums and gongs, attracting a large number of onlookers, creating a lively scene.

Zhu Ping'an wasn't sure if it was his imagination, but he thought he caught sight of a familiar figure in the crowd—someone who vanished as quickly as they appeared. When he looked again, he couldn't find them.

"Zhi'er, look, they're about to announce the results," his uncle, Zhu Shouren, seemed even more excited than Zhu Ping'an. He grabbed Zhu Ping'an's shoulder and shook him, pulling his attention to the scene.

The other two locals and his uncle's chubby friend also stood on tiptoe, their eyes following the officials carrying the list.

This time, from Kaoshan Town, Zhu Ping'an was the only one left.

Standing in the crowd, Zhu Ping'an quietly observed the excited people around him. At that moment, he felt strangely calm, a stark contrast to the excitement of his uncle and others.

There was no suspense this time. After the official delivering the list congratulated and encouraged the candidates, he began to post the rankings with the help of the officers. A long list of names was pinned to the wall, with both the A-list and B-list appearing on the same sheet.

The provincial first was listed at the top, followed by the thirty candidates who made the A-list, marked in red ink, separated from the B-list, which contained the next seventy names.

The mood of the scholars watching the list was more excited than in any previous exam. Those on the list were ecstatic—this was the title of "Tongsheng," the first step in the long journey of the imperial exams. Of course, the candidates who failed were even more disappointed. Many cried bitterly. While they had been on

the list for previous exams, this time they were not, and their circumstances were vastly different. Failing meant they would have to retake the county and provincial exams, a process involving seven or eight smaller exams, with many uncertainties. Seeing the joy of those on the list only made their sorrow deeper.

Once the list was posted, the exclamations of Zhu Ping'an's uncle and the others were nonstop, sounding like ducks being strangled, which was quite painful to the ears.

They looked at the list, then at Zhu Ping'an, as if they didn't recognize him.

Zhu Ping'an was also a bit surprised, but after a moment, a silly smile crept across his face. As the ancients said: "Heaven rewards diligence, and sincerity never deceives."

Amidst the bustling, laughing, and grieving crowd, the final provincial exam list was revealed.

First place: Zhu Ping'an; second place: Wang Jin; third place: Zheng Wei; fourth place: Xia Luoming... Tenth place: Feng Shanshui...

This time, the provincial first was truly the provincial top scorer, and it was no wonder his uncle and the others were so shocked. The quality of the provincial first was much higher than that of the county exam first. This was the result of fierce competition among scholars from the six counties of Anqing Prefecture. Although these scholars were not even at the level of "Xiu Cai," for them, it was something they had never dared to imagine. Zhu Ping'an's uncle and several other locals had taken over ten years just to barely pass the provincial exam, but Zhu Ping'an, only thirteen years old, had participated in the Tongzi Exam for the first time and had returned with the provincial top scorer's title—it was almost like a fairy tale.

Moreover, what made them envious and frustrated was that generally, the provincial top scorer was almost guaranteed to pass the academy exams and become a "Xiu Cai" (a successful candidate). This was a well-known unspoken rule, and it had been the case for years. As long as Zhu Ping'an didn't do anything extreme, his success in the academy exams was virtually assured.

For this provincial top scorer, Zhu Ping'an was somewhat surprised, far more pleased than with the previous round's first-place result. First of all, this time, he could say that he achieved this through his own true abilities, without relying on plagiarizing the Qing Dynasty top scholar's paper in his mind; secondly, while the provincial exam was just a qualification test for the imperial examination and not the main challenge, it still had its difficulty. Although other scholars had looked down on him repeatedly, it was undeniable that they had high mastery in the Eight-Legged Essay and the Four Books and Five Classics.

Of course, Zhu Ping'an did not let his joy cloud his mind. There was a bit of luck involved in becoming the top scorer this time. For instance, the fifteen-coin question from the examination paper, the unexpected encounter with the old man fishing, and the fortunate leap in his calligraphy skills... Perhaps the examiners simply appreciated his writing style, among other factors. Moreover, this was merely the provincial exam, a competition between scholars of a single province. There was still the next level—the metropolitan exam. Even after passing that, it was only a qualification for the imperial examination. Later on, there would still be the regional exams, the palace exams, and so on.

The long march had just begun; this was merely a trivial first step.

Zhu Ping'an's success as the provincial top scorer astonished not only his uncle and the others, but also the county top scorers like Xia Luoming from Tongcheng and Feng Shanshui from Sushong. The only one who remained unaffected was Wang Jin from Taihu. After looking at the list, his expression remained unchanged, as though the top three positions had nothing to do with him.

However, Xia Luoming from Tongcheng, Feng Shanshui from Sushong, and others were not as calm. They had all been striving to win first place, much like a group of lions evenly matched, none willing to yield. They quietly competed with each other, all wanting to come in first. Yet, in the blink of an eye, the gluttonous fat pig had already run wildly to the finish line, screeching.

It felt like punching into cotton.

"Ahem, Zhu Xian, congratulations," Feng Shanshui from Sushong barely managed to maintain his composure.

Xia Luoming from Tongcheng and the others, however, were somewhat enraged. They merely cupped their hands and then left.

"Zhi'er, you've become the top scorer?" Uncle Zhu Shouren still couldn't believe it and reached out to pinch Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an winced, gritting his teeth at the unexpected pinch from his uncle.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an's pained expression, Uncle finally believed he wasn't dreaming. His thirteen-year-old nephew had, in his very first attempt at the boy's exam, not only passed but had taken first place.

This was a blow.

"Younger generations are truly frightening..."

The other two villagers also sighed, helping Uncle leave. They headed to the familiar tavern, seemingly preparing to stay out all night again.

No one celebrated, so Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to celebrate on his own. Perhaps, it really could only be himself.

On his way back to the inn, Zhu Ping'an bought some wine and meat and returned to his room.

When he pushed open the door to the inn, the wine and food he was carrying were still in his hands. Looking around, the room was spotless, and his bedding was neatly folded. The room only retained a faint fragrance from the seductress.

"Hmm, she's really gone."

Zhu Ping'an seemed unsurprised by the departure of the seductress. Calmly, he placed the food on the table. In fact, he had known she would leave for some time; he just didn't know exactly when.

It was still early spring, but the sound of a cuckoo bird could be heard at night. Such birds were typically heard near the end of spring or the beginning of summer, not that Zhu Ping'an knew this from village life.

"Not returning, just a signal for the accomplices to call her back," Zhu Ping'an mused. Otherwise, why else had the seductress been tossing and turning? It was probably why he hesitated so many times when buying food, unsure when she would leave and worried he might buy too much and not be able to eat it all.

As Zhu Ping'an placed the food on the table, he noticed a letter and a fifty-tael silver note under the wine jar at the corner of the table.

This vixen was quite interesting, Zhu Ping'an smirked.