

Rise 112

Chapter 112: Embarrassment

When Zhu Ping'an and his uncle, along with others, were surrounded by the crowd and brought into the center, the debates and discussions rose incessantly.

"Is this the top scorer from yesterday?" someone in the crowd, seeing Zhu Ping'an looking like a drenched chicken, with coarse clothes and that black wooden board, couldn't help but doubt, "Could it be that you all conspired to deceive us?"

"He's still young, but even so... this appearance..."

As the murmurs of doubt spread, those who had attended the Jingxian Poetry Gathering finally recognized the drenched Zhu Ping'an and whispered to those nearby, confirming that the person was indeed Zhu Ping'an.

Despite this, the skepticism and debate continued to be heard.

Looking like a drenched chicken, young in age, with an honest face, he hardly resembled the charming and suave top scorer they had imagined. He looked more like a rural young man who had just returned from planting rice and weeding.

"Everyone, please make way, let my nephew Ping'an sit down." At this moment, Zhu Ping'ans' uncle, Zhu Shouren, became charismatic again, waving his hand elegantly to the crowd.

Amid the discussions, a path was cleared, and Zhu Shouren, along with several villagers, pushed Zhu Ping'an to the desk where ink and paper were placed. Some pulled his arms, some pressed his shoulders, and without allowing him to protest, they made him sit at the desk.

Ten years of hard study, was it just so you could make others jealous?

Zhu Ping'an felt deeply disrespected by their actions, especially as his uncle and the others tried to take on tasks beyond their capabilities.

Sitting at the desk, Zhu Ping'an glanced around at the crowd, his gaze finally resting on his uncle and the villagers. He shook his head slightly, unwilling to be further involved in this melodramatic situation.

"Hmm? What does shaking your head mean?"

"Can't you write anything?"

"Someone who's just seeking fame, unable to live up to their reputation."

The onlookers were getting agitated. After much persuasion, the female scholar had finally agreed to reveal her true identity if the poetry was good, but... now it seemed like another opportunity was slipping away. How could they not be upset, and thus began to complain.

Zhu Ping'an sat there, hearing the complaints and criticisms, remaining calm and composed with the same honest and steady expression.

While the complaints continued, a delicate voice came from the stage.

"Is this young master the top scorer, Master Zhu? I have long heard of your name."

The crowd looked up and saw the female scholar with skin like ice and jade, walking gracefully toward them. She slightly bowed and greeted Zhu Ping'an.

The fact that the female scholar had come so close made the crowd excited.

But they then heard an indifferent "Oh, it's a pleasure."

Who dared to treat our female scholar so dismissively! The crowd was enraged, and they turned to see Zhu Ping'an, drenched like a chicken, now bending down with his hands clasped.

This person, seeking fame without the ability to back it up, couldn't even write a poem and now was treating our female scholar with such neglect—this was unbearable!

"Zhi'er, your uncle is weak with alcohol. Please compose a poem for the female scholar and let her provide some feedback." At this moment, Zhu Ping'an's uncle stepped forward, his tone serious and righteous, as if giving the younger generation a chance to shine before the crowd's anger could erupt.

Everyone once again turned their gaze to Zhu Ping'an, and the female scholar, Mo'er, who was standing before the stage, blinked her eyes and looked at him.

Everyone was eager to see how Zhu Ping'an would respond.

"I am not good at writing poems or verses, I fear I will disappoint my uncle," Zhu Ping'an said, shaking his head slightly.

His uncle froze, not expecting this response from Zhu Ping'an.

"Master Zhu is too modest. At the Jingxian Poetry Gathering, the farewell poem you wrote was brilliant, and we sisters have treasured and sung it to this day. Your poem on snow was also unique. Today, as Master Zhu steps into the Zui Jun Tower, why not leave a great work behind, so that Mo'er can speak of it to the other sisters in the future, and share in the honor?"

Mo'er, standing before the stage, pursed her lips, gave another bow, and spoke gracefully.

The female scholar opened her mouth, and naturally, everyone supported her, following her lead in agreement.

"Exactly, even a talented person like the one at the head of the table shouldn't be incapable of writing a poem."

"Quickly, write one. Could it be that you look down on our female scholar?"

"I dare anyone to look down on our female scholar. Even if it costs me everything, I'll fight to the death to defend her."

The crowd was filled with righteous indignation, and once again, all eyes turned to Zhu Ping'an.

This girl... she's doing it on purpose, isn't she? Deliberately placing herself in the position of a weak person, while propping herself up to manipulate others. It's not entirely her fault, though; it's the way survival works. A famous person's poem could easily change their destiny, like how a poem by Liu Yong could easily make a brothel girl famous.

One could say this is the embryonic form of the entertainment industry's unspoken rules.

But why does she believe I can write a good poem?

Zhu Ping'an raised his head and glanced at the female scholar on stage, standing and making a salute. Then, he looked again at the crowd, whose excitement had turned into an almost hormonal frenzy.

A woman without talent is virtuous, and an ordinary woman's life is dull and uninteresting. It's only natural for the female scholar to be so popular.

But this has nothing to do with me. I'm only thirteen, and my focus is not here!

"I am young and lacking in talent, so I'm afraid I'll disappoint you, Miss. If it were to write a scholarly essay, it might be possible, but composing poetry or lyrics is not my strong suit. I apologize." Zhu Ping'an stood up from his seat, clasped his hands in a slight bow, and spoke with some regret.

"Apologies, Uncle. Apologies, everyone. Oh, by the way, Uncle, everyone, I plan to return home today. I wonder what you all plan to do?" Zhu Ping'an said, bowing to everyone around him before inquiring about the return date.

Uncle and a few fellow villagers exchanged glances, all shaking their heads, then tried to persuade Zhu Ping'an to stay and prepare for the exam.

"Zhi'er, there are only a few months left until the entrance exam. Returning home will waste time. Why not stay here and prepare for a few months, then go together to the exam?"

"That's right, An Ge'er. Time is precious, and money can't buy time."

Upon hearing this, Zhu Ping'an glanced at Uncle and the villagers, and in his mind, a thousand curses rushed through his head. What courage do you drunken people from the brothel have to talk about time being precious and returning home wasting time? Since the county exam, I haven't seen any of you seriously preparing for the exam, have I?

"Zhi'er is homesick. Since you all plan to stay here for the exam preparations, I'll go back to pack up. When the weather clears, I'll head home." Zhu Ping'an gave a bow to his uncle and fellow villagers and didn't even glance at the female scholar, who was being admired by the crowd, before turning to leave.

The female scholar, standing gracefully on stage, seemed to have become agitated, her eyes even starting to moisten.

She was pitiful to behold. This boy is too hateful and frustrating!

The crowd, stirred with indignation, closed in around Zhu Ping'an, forming a circle so tight it was as if they would trample him underfoot, eager to bring him down with the fury of thousands of steps.

"This person looks down on us, that's fine, but to treat our female scholar with such disdain, I simply cannot swallow this anger!"

"This person is extremely arrogant!"

"Rumor has it that this person, a good-for-nothing in the eyes of the world, cannot write poetry, and now plans to return to his hometown. Hahaha, truly pitiable and hateful!"

Everyone began expressing their indignation. At this moment, another voice came through, "Brother Zhu, this is your fault. As the saying goes, when the crowd speaks, it's hard to deny. Since everyone is saying this, you should not refuse. When young, it's natural to be full of vigor and hidden talents are commendable, but what's wrong with being a little reckless sometimes? One cannot always hide their sharpness in a sword sheath, for it will rust and be wasted. Today, why not write a poem?"

The voice was familiar. Zhu Ping'an looked up and saw a smiling Feng Shanshui from Susong slowly walking over.

Then, another voice came, which belonged to Xia Luoming from Tongcheng, walking beside Feng Shanshui. "Brother Zhu, don't refuse. Recently, rumors have been circulating that your reputation doesn't match your title, claiming that your farewell poem and snow poem were stolen from others! Brother Zhu, with such

talent, how could this be true? I disdain such talk, but sadly, my words carry little weight, and the rumors continue. This is the time for you to clarify, Brother Zhu, do not refuse."

How coincidental. Zhu Ping'an smiled slightly as he looked at the approaching figures.

"I'll come and grind the ink for you. Whether you write a poem or not is up to you, Brother Zhu. If you don't need ink, feel free to pour it on my face." Feng Shanshui walked up to the table and immediately began grinding the ink, casually leaving those words behind.

This was very much like a toast: I'll drink it all, you do as you wish, if you can't finish it, just pour it on my face.

With such words said, all eyes in the room turned toward Zhu Ping'an, waiting for his reaction. If he were to leave now, he would gain a reputation for being reckless, disrespectful to his friends, ungrateful, and a plagiarist, among other negative labels.

The surroundings fell silent as everyone stared eagerly at Zhu Ping'an.

"Since that's the case, I will embarrass myself."

Under everyone's watchful eyes, Zhu Ping'an slowly spoke.

Then, under their gazes, Zhu Ping'an turned to the table, picked up the brush, dipped it in the ink that Feng Shanshui had ground, and turned to the nearby incense-scented rice paper. Glancing at the female scholar standing gracefully with moist eyes on the platform, he slowly spoke, "This poem is an apology to you, Miss."

Zhu Ping'an only glanced at her before lowering his head and beginning to write on the rice paper. Feng Shanshui, who had finished grinding the ink and was standing by, watched quietly and began to read the poem aloud as Zhu Ping'an wrote:

"Mu...lan...ci"

His voice was clear, and the pace was moderate, so everyone could hear. As Zhu Ping'an wrote the first line, Feng Shanshui's expression subtly changed, and his voice trembled slightly as he began to read:

"Life...if only it were as we first met..."

This was the first line of the Mulan Ci, and it immediately struck deep into the heart, stirring emotions!

The expressions of everyone present changed upon hearing this...