

Rise 132

Chapter 132: Admission

Just before dawn, the sky once again fell into darkness.

However, the inn was brightly lit, with scholars and students rising one by one, washing up, packing their belongings, and preparing for one of the most crucial battles of their lives.

"Brother Zhu, Brother Zhu, are you done washing up? Hurry up, hurry up..." The loud voice of the chubby Xue Chi reached them even before he arrived.

Panting heavily, Xue Chi arrived at Zhu Ping'an's room. Just as he raised his hand to knock on the door, it opened.

"Let's go." Zhu Ping'an said as he pushed the door open.

Zhu Ping'an walked ahead, and the chubby Xue Chi followed closely behind, panting for breath. Being overweight, he didn't walk very fast. Both of them were empty-handed, carrying nothing at all. Xue Chi hadn't even brought his gold lock or the two rings he normally wore. The examinations for the imperial and provincial tests were similar in that all necessary items would be provided at the exam site to ensure strict exam rules and prevent cheating.

On the way, they occasionally encountered other scholars heading to the Jiangnan Imperial Examination, walking in groups of two or three. The atmosphere felt rather serious, with little in the way of lightheartedness or joy.

"Cough, cough, cough, Zhi'er, wait for us!" A voice called out from afar.

Zhu Ping'an stopped in his tracks and looked in the direction of the voice. On the bridge connecting both sides of the Qinhuai River, several panting scholars were approaching. Among them was Zhu Ping'an's uncle, Zhu Shouren, and following him were his fellow villagers, including his uncle's chubby friend.

Zhu Ping'an watched as his uncle and the others crossed the bridge from the opposite side, feeling at a loss for words. Even with the exams looming, his uncle still didn't forget to deal with his daily affairs!

Given the urgency of the situation, Zhu Ping'an didn't introduce Xue Chi to his uncle and the others. Instead, they all continued on their way to the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall.

When they arrived at the entrance of the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall, the rising sun, like blood, had soaked half the sky in the east, seemingly signaling that today would be an exceptionally brutal battle for the scholars.

At the entrance of the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall, nearly a hundred stern-faced guards were maintaining order, and dozens of soldiers clad in armor stood with their swords drawn at either side, creating a very solemn atmosphere. The examinees were lined up according to the provinces they came from, with each province's candidates divided into two lines under the guidance of the guards.

There were several tables set up at the entrance, with two officials behind each table checking the list of names and verifying the candidates from each province.

The register detailed each candidate's birthplace, age, appearance, and family background for the last three generations. This had all been verified beforehand by guarantee students or required to be signed personally, making it more stringent than the provincial or county exams to prevent impersonation and cheating.

The chief examiner sat in a chair at the center of the gate, with two rows of guarantee students standing by.

The officials called out the names from the list, and the candidates stepped forward to answer loudly, saying which guarantee student had vouched for them. At this point, the guarantee student for that candidate would step forward to verify their identity. If they found it was not the correct person, they would immediately raise an objection, and the chief examiner would treat it as an attempt to cheat, punishing the offender on the spot with serious consequences. If the guarantee student confirmed it was indeed their responsibility, they would loudly state the guarantee student's name, and only then would the roll call be complete, allowing the candidate to enter.

"Zhu Ping'an from Xiahe Village, guaranteed by students Sun Hongzhi, Liu Chuanwen, and Zhang Fangweng."

When it was Zhu Ping'an's turn, he stepped forward, cupped his hands in greeting, and loudly called out his guarantee.

Soon, he heard his beloved teacher, Master Sun Lao Fuzi, and several other teachers' friends vouching for him: "Student Sun Hongzhi guarantees." "Student Liu Chuanwen guarantees." "Student Zhang Fangweng guarantees."

After the guarantees were complete, the official nodded and signaled for Zhu Ping'an to enter. At this point, Zhu Ping'an finally had time to exchange a few words with his teachers, Master Sun Lao Fuzi, and the others.

This time, Old Master Sun's gaze was filled with approval.

After briefly meeting Old Master Sun's eyes, Zhu Ping'an quickly glanced at the examination official. The examination official was a man in his fifties with a strong aura of authority. His square face and long beard gave him an air of justice.

After just one glance, Zhu Ping'an was urged forward by the guide, a junior official.

The entrance to the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall was a triple-gate structure made of wood, with a passage for pedestrians through the center and closed sides. The main gate consisted of five sections, with a plaque reading "Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall" above the central door. The left plaque read "Opening the Gate," and the right plaque read "Call for Talent." On either side of the main gate stood a pair of stone lions over a meter tall, with archways bearing inscriptions: "Selecting Scholars through the Ming Jing" and "Seeking Talents for the Nation."

Led by the junior official, Zhu Ping'an entered the Jiangnan Imperial Examination Hall. After walking less than two meters past the main gate, he saw two stone pavilions. One bore the inscription "Orderly," while the other had "Serious" engraved on it.

The junior official led Zhu Ping'an a short distance further, and Zhu Ping'an was struck by the grandeur of a large building. This was a three-story square structure, with the horizontal plaque above the door reading "Mingyuan Tower" in golden characters. The first floor had walls on all four sides, each with a circular door, and four columns rising to the top. Every floor had numerous windows, ensuring a clear view from inside, offering unobstructed surveillance of the entire examination hall. The examination official and invigilators would oversee everything from this building during the exams.

This truly deserved to be a venue for the provincial exams. It was certainly incomparable to the shabby tents of the county and prefectural exams.

"Stop gawking, follow me to the examination rooms. There are others behind you," the guide, accustomed to first-time examinees marveling at the grandeur of the Imperial Examination Hall, urged Zhu Ping'an. Though accustomed to it, the guide knew better than to waste time, as he couldn't afford to delay the exam schedule.

"Oh." Zhu Ping'an snapped back to reality and followed the guide toward the examination rooms.

The examination rooms were where students would take their exams. Zhu Ping'an followed the guide around Mingyuan Tower to the western side; the eastern side also had examination rooms, but Zhu Ping'an's room was located on the west side.

When Zhu Ping'an saw the examination rooms, he could only think of two words. The rooms were about 1.8 meters high, 1.2 meters deep, and about 1 meter wide, with walls over 2 meters tall and no doors. Each examination room held nearly a hundred rooms, all facing south, separated by brick walls. The name of each room was written in large characters above the entrance, with the order determined by the sequence of the "Thousand-Character Classic."

"Stop looking, go inside," the guide urged, leading Zhu Ping'an to the door of an examination room.

Zhu Ping'an entered the room at the guide's urging, and as he surveyed the space, he saw the walls made of brick about a foot or two off the ground. The bricks were arranged in two layers, with wooden boards placed on top and below. The upper boards were set forward, and the lower boards were set back. The lower boards served as benches, while the upper boards served as desks. The setup was very simple.

"At least for the county exams, you're lucky. Each exam only lasts a day. For the provincial exams, though, they go on for several days. At night, they take the upper boards off and place them on the lower ones to make beds," the guide briefly explained before leaving.

Sitting in the examination room, Zhu Ping'an felt only two things: frustration and fairness.

He felt frustrated because the room was so narrow that it was impossible to stretch out his legs or relax his back. Even standing up required careful attention to avoid bumping his head. He felt it was fair because, regardless of whether one was a county magistrate's son or a poor commoner, whether rich or destitute, everyone had to take the exam in this same confined space, embodying fairness.

Thinking of frustration, he couldn't help but think of the fat guy, Xue Chi. He'd definitely suffer a lot in the examination room.

Soon, someone brought over the examination supplies in a basket. Zhu Ping'an thanked them and began setting up, quickly arranging the ink, paper, and brush.

Everything was ready, now only awaiting the favorable wind.