

Rise 138

Chapter 138: Another Year of Exam Results

Zhu Ping'an had just returned to his seat when the chubby Xue Chi, like a bulldog, grinned and started foolishly laughing at him, evidently having noticed that Zhu Ping'an had just gone to settle the bill.

"Brother Xue, you really are something," Zhu Ping'an shook his head slightly.

"We're brothers; everything's in the wine. Come on," the chubby man grinned, holding up his cup.

Unable to refuse his hospitality, Zhu Ping'an reluctantly clinked glasses with him. The wine went down, sharp and pungent, but the aftertaste left a soft, sweet fragrance. The wine was good, but one should not overindulge.

Zhu Ping'an could still control himself, but his uncle Zhu Shouren, several local villagers, and the chubby Xue Chi were not the type to be restrained. They were the kind of people who would drink half a jin and still want more, until they ended up vomiting on the floor.

"Yo yo, the deer calls, eating the wild acorns. I have a distinguished guest, playing the zither and guqin. Playing the zither and guqin, harmonious and clear. I have fine wine to entertain my esteemed guest's heart..." As they grew merry, Uncle Zhu Shouren and the chubby man began banging bamboo sticks on the wine cups and singing "Xiao Ya: The Deer Calls," in high spirits.

The table was a mess, and Zhu Ping'an was slightly tipsy. His uncle, the chubby man, and others were already drunk, stumbling around, not able to distinguish between four and six, supporting themselves against the walls.

"Dong! Dong!"

"Dong! Dong!"

The sounds of the night watchman's drum rang out, signaling the second watch, beating several times in a row. The first watch, at three o'clock, marked the start of the night curfew, and now it was the second watch. If anyone was caught walking the streets by the officials, it didn't matter if they were scholars or not—they'd be struck with forty lashes right away.

Zhu Ping'an looked at the few people at the table, lying with tongues outstretched, a confused expression on his face.

However, since Zhu Ping'an had made the decision to dine at Zhuangyuan Tower, a place that often hosted drunken revelers, they were accustomed to such situations. And they had a solution: the back of the tavern connected to their own inn. Zhu Ping'an called for the waiter and ordered a large communal bed. After paying, he had the waiter help him get his uncle, the chubby man, and others settled there.

That night was chaotic. Lying on the large bed, the drunken people occasionally performed their "mouth-fountain" skills, making Zhu Ping'an pay an extra one hundred wen to the tavern.

The next morning, his uncle and others went to the other side of the Qinhuai River to meet the friend they had bid farewell to yesterday. After they left, the chubby man turned to Zhu Ping'an and said, "Brother Zhu, be careful of your uncle in the future."

"Why?" Zhu Ping'an asked casually.

"It's just a feeling. Better safe than sorry," the chubby man replied, shaking his head from a hangover, his words vague.

This chubby man, who seemed careless, turned out to be like a rough version of Zhang Fei—someone who could discern a person's true nature after one drink and warn others without causing suspicion. This surprised Zhu Ping'an, who had originally thought he was just a carefree type.

"Mm." Zhu Ping'an responded noncommittally.

Returning from the tavern to the inn, they passed by the Jiangnan Gongyuan (Imperial Examination Hall), where soldiers and constables stood at the gate, setting up a barrier. They warned each passerby to keep quiet. The second group of candidates for the provincial exams had started their journey, though no one knew who might end up with their assigned testing room next to a cesspit.

The chubby man, upon passing the Jiangnan Gongyuan, retched a few more times, purely out of reflex.

Because the exam results would be posted in ten days, Zhu Ping'an decided not to rush home. He would return after the results were out. So, during the day, he practiced calligraphy and read books. The mosquito repellent medicine he got from the pharmacy worked very well, so he kept it in his pouch. While reading in the woods, he was rarely bothered by mosquitoes, and time passed slowly.

Finally, the exciting moment arrived.

After the second group of provincial exam candidates finished their tests, the results were posted ten days later. Unlike county and prefecture exams, the provincial exam results were listed on fourteen separate boards—one for each prefecture, with the top scorers from each listed under their respective regions. Each prefecture also had its top candidate, the "First of the List," who was the true winner of the scholar's test.

On the day of the results, Zhu Ping'an had just returned from practicing calligraphy and reading. He hadn't even reached the inn when he saw a familiar group of people at the entrance—the uncle Zhu Shouren, other villagers, and the chubby man chatting with them.

Upon seeing Zhu Ping'an, they all rushed over, pulling his arms, grabbing his hands, pushing him from behind. Before he could react, they were already pushing him toward the Confucius Temple.

"Quick, we're waiting for you! The exam results are out!"

"Hurry up, the results are posted at the Confucius Temple this year. If we get there late, we won't get a good spot!"

The crowd was chattering excitedly as they pulled Zhu Ping'an along, starting to jog. Each of them was full of confidence, imagining the scene of the flower-pinning banquet after they passed the exam, occasionally discussing this or that along the way.

Zhu Ping'an listened to their imagined flower-pin banquet scenes with a painful expression, silently counting down the time until their eventual celebration.

It was hard to imagine how they would feel when they saw the rankings.

In front of the Confucius Temple, the crowd was overflowing, with people pushing and shoving. In addition to the candidates, many parents had also traveled long distances to come. The fourteen ranking boards were surrounded by people.

"Brother Zhu, brothers, I'm going to check the rankings first. Let's meet back here later," the chubby man said eagerly as he arrived at the Confucius Temple, not waiting to head straight for the ranking board of their mansion.

"Mm, don't get too excited," Zhu Ping'an hesitated for a moment but didn't say anything more.

"How could I not be excited? My old man has been trying for so many years but never made it. When I can slap that ranking in front of him, it'll be such a great feeling," the chubby man said, full of excitement.

Thinking of his father who scolded him every day, his gold lock around his neck rattled with excitement. After speaking, he eagerly pushed his way through the crowd toward the Fengyang mansion's ranking board, as quiet as a fat rabbit in motion.

Watching the chubby man squeeze and jostle through the crowd, Zhu Ping'an could only hope that his endurance was strong enough to handle it.

Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others were also eager to get to the Anqing mansion's ranking board. Zhu Ping'an was helplessly swept along by his uncle and others, forced into the crowd. Anyone unaware of the situation would think that it was Zhu Ping'an who was excitedly pushing forward.

Indeed, from the outside, that's exactly what it seemed like.

At this very moment, the group surrounding Zhu Ping'an included Tongcheng's Xia Luoming, Susong's Feng Shanshui, and their respected Guo and Liu brothers. In their eyes, Zhu Ping'an looked like a cat that had smelled fish, with no dignity left as he squeezed into the crowd, just like an ordinary person.

To them, Zhu Ping'an was laughable. He wrote a chrysanthemum poem and still foolishly thought he could make it onto the examination list.

"Truly ridiculous," Guo, who had once been perched at the window of a private room, writing poems, sneered as he watched Zhu Ping'an frantically squeezing through the crowd. "Whether you rush or take it slow, the ranking board is right there, and it won't change. Why bother making yourself look so disheveled? A true man doesn't behave like this."

"Exactly, Brother Guo is right, the gentlemanly way," Feng Shanshui waved his folding fan and agreed.

"Yes, how laughable! He couldn't even figure out the theme of his poem after so many days, and now he foolishly thinks he can make the list. Haha," a few people in the crowd laughed together in agreement.

These people walked leisurely toward the ranking boards, freely laughing at Zhu Ping'an, whose clothes were already a mess from pushing through the crowd.

Beneath the ranking board, some were crying, some were laughing, representing the myriad of human emotions.