

Rise 139

Chapter 139: The Academy Examination Results Are Announced

The crowd surged beneath the ranking list in Anqing Prefecture. Zhu Shouren, Zhu Ping'an's eldest uncle, and others exerted all their strength to squeeze through the throng and finally managed to find a spot where they could see the list. Their faces were full of anticipation. Before looking at the rankings, they worked together to push the disheveled Zhu Ping'an, who had been jostled by the crowd, to the front, eager to share the news of their success on the list with the former top scorer, Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an felt like he was being shoved around by a herd of pigs. He didn't know how many times his feet had been stepped on, and his head had been inadvertently knocked countless times.

"Zhu'er, hurry and look..."

"An-ge'er, now you can see the rankings..."

Zhu Ping'an's eldest uncle and the others patted him a few times, reminding him that he could look at the list now. Then, without delay, they eagerly raised their heads and started searching the rankings for his name.

They were confident—after all, they had gotten prior knowledge of the exam topic, which was chrysanthemums. How could they not make it?

The eldest uncle and the others were full of self-assurance.

But the unexpected happened. As soon as they lifted their heads and caught their first glimpse of the ranking list, they felt completely stunned.

The release of results for the county examination was called the "long desk," and the long desk of Anqing Prefecture listed 30 names, from first place to thirtieth, written in a single column on one sheet of paper.

Although the eldest uncle and the others were brimming with confidence, they had never imagined themselves taking the top spot. Thus, they planned to look from the bottom of the list upward, expecting their names to appear somewhere near the lower ten positions.

However, completely beyond their expectations, their eyes were involuntarily drawn to a very familiar name right at the top of the list!

First Place: Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an! Those three characters were incredibly familiar. They had seen his name countless times on the county and prefecture examination lists. And the person himself was standing right next to them.

But—but why was Zhu Ping'an in first place? Didn't that chubby fellow say Zhu Ping'an's exam poem about chrysanthemums wasn't as good as his? Zhu Ping'an himself even admitted it! How could he end up in first place? It defied logic! It wasn't reasonable! How could this happen...?

The eldest uncle and the others stared at the top of the list, at Zhu Ping'an's name, unable to recover for a long time. They muttered incoherently, unable to form a single coherent sentence.

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an also saw his name. Though he had been confident he would make it onto the list, being ranked first was something he had never expected. After all, there were many candidates, and everyone was well-prepared. Still, seeing himself in first place brought an uncontrollable, silly grin to his face.

While Zhu Ping'an could smile, his eldest uncle and the others could not.

Initially, they had planned to look from the bottom upward, but Zhu Ping'an's name caught their attention. Although they couldn't wrap their heads around how he secured first place, they were still confident they had made it onto the list. Since they had already started looking from the top, they decided to continue downward.

But, damn it, they combed through the list from top to bottom and still couldn't find their names—not even a name that shared two characters with theirs!

Zhu Ping'an got the top spot, and we didn't even make the list!

This news was like a thunderclap on a sunny day—completely unbelievable. We already knew the exam topic in advance! Our chrysanthemum poems were better than Zhu Ping'an's! How could this happen?

Countless thoughts raced through their minds, but they kept returning to the fact that Zhu Ping'an was just a poor, powerless, and unconnected guy from a mountain village. How could he possibly cheat?

What the hell was going on? Zhu Ping'an's eldest uncle and the others were on the verge of tears but couldn't even cry.

Meanwhile, Xia Luoming and his group, who had been laughing at Zhu Ping'an's awkward appearance in the crowd, came over as well. One look at the devastated expressions on Zhu Ping'an's uncle and his companions, and they could immediately read the underlying message: they didn't make the list.

Ha! Of course! Chrysanthemums? Mustard flowers would have been better! It's no surprise they failed.

But then, why was Zhu Ping'an, that so-called "chrysanthemum guy," grinning like an idiot?

Could it be that he couldn't accept the reality of failure, and it drove him mad? That would be such a pity—he did have some talent.

With that thought, Xia Luoming and his group strolled over and raised their heads to look at the rankings for Anqing Prefecture.

Naturally, they started from the top. After all, their abilities spoke for themselves. The top five spots—they were bound to be among them.

But when they looked up for the first time—what the hell?!

Zhu Ping'an.

What the hell is this?! How could that "chrysanthemum guy" possibly be in first place? Could the list have been written in reverse order?! This was too ridiculous. In theory, someone who wrote a chrysanthemum poem shouldn't even have been admitted! His fundamentals were so weak! But now he's at the top of the list—what's going on? That's the top scorer, the Anshou!

They thought they must have been mistaken, so they carefully read through the entire list again.

First Place: Zhu Ping'an; Second Place: Liu Qian; Third Place: Wang Jin; Fourth Place: Ding Ji...

Eleventh Place: Guo Ziyu; Twelfth Place: Feng Shanshui; Thirteenth Place: Xia Luoming...

Zhu Ping'an was the top scorer, Liu Qian was only second, and Guo Ziyu, although he made the list, was ranked eleventh. Everyone else was ranked below twelfth. Even Xia Luoming, unexpectedly, was ranked below Feng Shanshui.

It was chaos—absolute chaos. Apart from Feng Shanshui, whose lips curled ever so slightly in a concealed smirk, everyone else was utterly stunned.

Although all thirty people on the list passed and became scholars, the rankings were worlds apart. The top ten were stipendiary scholars, while the others were merely attached scholars upon initial admission. Only after exceptional performance in subsequent annual and provincial exams could they advance to Zengsheng or Linsheng.

Linsheng were the best-performing scholars, with limited slots, and they received government grain stipends. Linsheng could also serve as guarantors for exam candidates, ensuring no fraud or impersonation. But none of that mattered. What mattered most was reputation. Linsheng had the most prestigious status!

What they couldn't wrap their heads around was this: How could Zhu Ping'an be the top scorer? How could a "chrysanthemum guy" take first place?!

This was the prefecture exam, selecting pillars of the nation! How could it be so careless?!

Unfair grading! The examiners were deceived! We demand to see the test papers!

This was the cry of their hearts!

However, the ancient imperial examination system did exceptionally well in this regard. Exam papers were available for review. If you failed, you could request to review your paper, and this was not only permitted but even encouraged. This served as a form of oversight.

Due to the high number of requests and the substantial workload, Zhu Ping'an's exam paper was quickly displayed by the officials.

The first thing Xia Luoming and others looked at was Zhu Ping'an's trial poem.

When they saw Zhu Ping'an's "On the Yellow Flowers Scattered Like Gold," they immediately froze, feeling as though they had swallowed a fly—utterly uncomfortable.

"On the Yellow Flowers Scattered Like Gold"

The fertile fields reveal early mulberry scenes, the flatlands exude the fragrance of rapeseed blooms.

Graceful, yet they do not contend for spring, they merely herald the season's arrival.

This poem, "On the Yellow Flowers Scattered Like Gold," was composed by Zhu Ping'an, who borrowed two lines from a modern great man's poetry and paired them with two lines of his own creation to complete it. While it had its flaws—perhaps feeling unfinished or other issues—the last two lines were enough to amaze everyone present.

"Cough, cough, cough. Zhi'er, you wrote this about rapeseed flowers in spring, didn't you? It's off-topic," said Uncle Zhu Shouren as he looked at Zhu Ping'an's displayed exam paper. When he saw the trial poem Zhu Ping'an had written, his eyes lit up.

But just as Uncle Zhu finished speaking, he noticed the clerk displaying Zhu Ping'an's paper, along with Xia Luoming and several others nearby, all looking at him with expressions as though they were watching a fool.

"Could it be... I was wrong?" Uncle Zhu Shouren's confidence wavered.

"You're not wrong," some villagers and a few failed scholars nearby supported him.

"You are wrong. 'Yellow Flowers Scattered Like Gold' originates from The Literary Selections by Xiao Tong of the Southern Liang Dynasty and Tang Dynasty officials. It indeed refers to rapeseed flowers in spring..." someone in the crowd gently shook their head and explained.

"That's Taihu's Wang Jin," someone in the crowd recognized the speaker.

Uncle Zhu and the others stood there as if struck by lightning, unable to regain their composure for a long time.