

## Rise 195

### Chapter 195: Mastery Beyond Limits

On the third day after the county examination, the results were posted outside the county office. All scholars whose names appeared on the list were eligible to participate in the upcoming special imperial exam. As for those not on the list, they had no choice but to return home. Of course, if they were interested in watching others take the exam from a distance, no one would stop them.

Early that morning, the chubby Xue Chi adorned himself with gold and silver, dressing up like a groom, and rushed off to check the list.

In fact, this guy had come knocking on Zhu Ping'an's door before dawn, wanting to go together. However, Zhu Ping'an had no interest at all. He was already certain of making the list, so why waste time checking it? But Xue Chi was extremely excited. He had been waiting for this day for too long, eager to show off in front of the other scholars. He couldn't resist flaunting his success.

A young man should not be too arrogant.

Watching Xue Chi's swaggering figure, Zhu Ping'an inexplicably felt as if thunder was rumbling faintly in the sky.

At the entrance of the inn, Zhu Ping'an and Xue Chi parted ways. Xue Chi, brimming with excitement, headed straight to the county office to await the results, while Zhu Ping'an leisurely carried his black wooden board and strolled toward his usual spot in the woods.

Repeating his usual preparation routine, he then sat on a rock, spread out his black wooden board, and began practicing calligraphy.

"The state of mind shapes the world; a still mind is like calm water."

On this particular day, while practicing calligraphy, Zhu Ping'an felt himself entering a wonderful state. Ever since his breakthrough at Taihu, his calligraphy seemed to have reached a new level—one that could almost be described as transcendental. It was as if a lone sail navigating the vast ocean had suddenly soared into the sky, gliding freely among the clouds.

How to describe this transcendental state? It was much like the descriptions of swordsmanship in wuxia novels:

When one first learns swordplay, they use the sword with their hands, sometimes failing to control it properly and even hurting themselves. After a period of training, they reach the level of hand-sword unity—wielding the sword with their heart, moving it as they wish, achieving a higher level of mastery. The highest level of swordsmanship is the unity of heart and sword, where neither the sword nor the self exists. Every movement becomes a sword strike; even a falling flower petal or a plucked leaf can be a deadly weapon. A mere embroidery needle can hold off three sword masters—such is the state of transcendence.

Now, Zhu Ping'an felt that his calligraphy had reached this same level—where the brush and the mind became one, and he no longer needed to consciously think about using the brush.

At the beginning of practicing calligraphy, one must guide the brush with their hand. There is a process from the brush resisting control to eventually becoming familiar. The next stage is the unity of hand and brush—where the brush feels like an extension of the hand, and writing becomes second nature. Zhu Ping'an had

long since reached this level. But at this moment, he had entered the third realm: unity of mind and brush, where neither the self nor the brush existed.

Many great calligraphers of ancient times had reached this state.

Wang Xizhi, by observing the movements of a white goose in the water, attained enlightenment and mastered the "Floating Goose Hook" technique. Zhang Xu, inspired by porters fighting for the right of way and by Gongsun Da-niang's sword dance, realized the intricate balance of structure and rhythm in calligraphy, leading to his mastery of wild cursive script at an unparalleled level. Huai Su, through observing the rolling summer clouds and surging ocean waves, comprehended the grand and turbulent spirit of cursive script, capturing its majestic power.

Having reached this level, Zhu Ping'an felt that his calligraphy was not only full of vitality and structure but also imbued with an ineffable spirit. His brushstrokes carried an innate momentum, like sailing through wind and waves.

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an felt that regardless of whether he had a brush, whether it was a good or bad brush, even if he were given a rotten tree branch or a blade of dogtail grass, he could still create extraordinary calligraphy.

This feeling is a bit hard to stop.

Zhu Ping'an wielded his brush and splashed ink, gradually becoming immersed in the process, unable to pull himself away.

It wasn't until a fine drizzle fell from the sky, drenching him and pulling him out of his calligraphic fervor, that he snapped back to reality.

Is it raining?

As he practiced his calligraphy, Zhu Ping'an looked up, wiped the raindrops from his forehead, and belatedly realized that he was already almost completely soaked.

How long had it been raining before he even noticed? That should be enough for today.

Shaking his head, Zhu Ping'an reluctantly put away his brush and bamboo tube, then stood up unhurriedly and began walking out of the forest. Looking up at the sky, he saw the fine drizzle falling like silk threads, forming a dense curtain of rain that draped over Yingtian City like a veil of cicada wings.

On his way back to the inn, the rain intensified. Water pooled on the blue stone-paved streets, forming small streams that gurgled through the city's drainage system.

When he arrived at the inn, the innkeeper saw that he was drenched and quickly handed him a dry towel to wipe his head. He also instructed the staff to prepare a bowl of ginger soup.

"Thank you, shopkeeper. I'd also like a serving of breakfast sent upstairs," Zhu Ping'an said, drying his hair and returning the towel as a gesture of appreciation.

"You're too polite, Young Master Zhu. Oh, I almost forgot! Just now, a messenger came with good news—you've passed the provincial exam!" The innkeeper, about to instruct the staff to send breakfast upstairs, suddenly remembered and beamed at Zhu Ping'an as he relayed the news.

"Oh? That early this time?" Zhu Ping'an was a bit surprised.

"Indeed! The messenger also mentioned that the examining officer stayed up all night grading the papers and didn't even rest before arranging the announcement." The innkeeper seemed to hold Examiner Zhao in high regard.

"I see. Well, thank you again, shopkeeper. Also, could you please send up a bucket of hot water?" Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in gratitude and made the request before heading upstairs.

Before long, the staff delivered the ginger soup, breakfast, and hot water to his room. After drinking the ginger soup and eating, Zhu Ping'an took a quick hot bath, changed into dry clothes, and sat back at his desk by the window to continue studying.

However, the weather outside seemed to be getting worse.

A storm raged—thunder boomed, lightning flashed, and rain poured down as if the heavens had burst open. Zhu Ping'an genuinely worried that the roof might get blown off. The wind lashed the rain against the wooden windows like countless whips, forcing water through the gaps and down the windowsill. The lightning flickered like a giant serpent leaping through the clouds, and a deafening thunderclap exploded right outside the window...

Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to shut the window and move his desk several steps back.

"Uh... could it be that Fatty was showing off too much and triggered all this thunder?" Zhu Ping'an muttered to himself, his morning intuition seemingly proving true.

Knowing Fatty's nature, if he could show off to the fullest, he would never settle for anything less! Zhu Ping'an wondered what Fatty's reaction would be upon seeing the storm outside—would he still dare to continue?

The rankings were posted today, meaning the imperial exam was not far off. After moving his desk back, Zhu Ping'an quickly refocused on his studies. He read and practiced calligraphy, undisturbed by the raging storm outside.