

## Rise 209

### Chapter 209: The Impulse to Slap a Face

Everyone focused on their thoughts, wielding their brushes with enthusiasm. For a moment, the fragrance of ink overpowered the aroma of food.

From time to time, someone would finish writing a poem. Occasionally, poems would be passed around for others to read, and sometimes, they would reach the frontmost table. The people seated there were all outstanding scholars, top achievers in the imperial examination, and their poetry was of high quality. Every now and then, two or three particularly excellent pieces would receive praise from the esteemed figures at the head table.

### Bamboo

The ancient bamboo before the steps stands tall and dense,

Its countless stalks flourishing through the years.

Most admirable is its humble yet unyielding nature,

Enduring wind and rain, unfazed by the cold.

Guo Ziyu's poem Bamboo was also passed forward and received the approval of the dignitaries at the first table. This filled him with pride. As he looked around, he noticed that at the lowest-ranked seat, Zhu Ping'an had yet to write a single word. Sensing an opportunity, Guo Ziyu's confidence grew.

Like the other scholars who were moving between tables to exchange poems, Guo Ziyu picked up a cup of wine and slowly made his way to Zhu Ping'an's table. He greeted the scholars seated there, exchanged pleasantries, discussed poetry, and shared a drink.

Then, as if suddenly noticing the blank sheet of paper in front of Zhu Ping'an, he feigned surprise and exclaimed:

"Brother Zhu, you are known for your literary talent—why haven't you written anything yet?"

His exclamation drew the attention of nearby tables. Everyone else had already completed their poems. While not all had received praise from the head table, their work was still commendable. Upon hearing that someone had not yet written anything, curiosity got the better of them, and they turned to look.

The young genius, said to rival Grand Secretary Yang...

And yet, he had not written a single word.

Was he deliberately attracting attention? Or was his reputation undeserved?

People began forming their own opinions.

"Brother Zhu comes from the countryside, where there are surely plenty of pine trees, bamboo, and plum blossoms. Perhaps he has written so many poems before that he can't decide which to use?"

Guo Ziyu pretended to speak in Zhu Ping'an's defense, but in doing so, he subtly revealed Zhu Ping'an's humble origins.

At this revelation, some scholars regarded Zhu Ping'an with slightly different expressions. A few, having heard of his modest background, felt admiration, but they were the minority.

The idea of social class was deeply ingrained in ancient times. Traditional culture placed great emphasis on lineage and inheritance, and the bureaucratic system valued family background above all. It was a harsh reality—distinguished families of officials and scholars produced renowned figures generation after generation, whereas commoners had little chance of breaking into the upper ranks of society. For those of low status, ascending the social ladder was harder than a carp leaping over the dragon gate.

So, upon learning that Zhu Ping'an was from a humble background, most people's reactions were not admiration but skepticism. A child from a poor family—without connections or wealth—how far could he really go?

And now, seeing that he had not even started writing, coupled with the fact that he had ranked last in the imperial exam, many began to doubt him.

During the provincial exam, tens of thousands of students competed. Many came from scholarly families and had been tutored by elders since childhood, studying diligently from dawn to dusk, essentially making them professional test-takers. With superior educational environments, how could a mere village boy surpass them? For a so-called prodigy like Zhu Ping'an, luck must have played a significant role.

Zhu Ping'an looked at Guo Ziyu, who stood beside him, his face carrying a subtle air of provocation and disdain.

Why did people always seem to target him?

Was it jealousy?

Normally, he would have laughed it off. But seeing them struggle over their word choices, and thinking about how many similar moments had played out throughout the Ming Dynasty, a sense of frustration welled up within him, difficult to suppress.

Suddenly, he felt the urge to prove them wrong.

Well, sorry. You walked right into this. And I just so happen to have some pent-up emotions to release.

Writing poetry? He had never feared anyone in that regard. After all, from the late Ming to the Qing dynasty and even modern times, so many poems and literary works were, in a way, already "his."

"Among the new scholars, I am the most unworthy. With such brilliant talent before me, I feel utterly ashamed," Zhu Ping'an said with a slight smile, cupping his hands toward Guo Ziyu.

You're quite good at deflecting, aren't you?

But since I've been given this opportunity, how could I possibly let you off so easily? Guo Ziyu thought to himself.

"Brother Zhu, don't be so modest. If even you, who passed the exam at thirteen, claim to feel ashamed, then the rest of us should just go find a crooked tree and hang ourselves," Guo Ziyu laughed, gesturing toward everyone, shaking his head.

"Exactly," someone chimed in, eager to stir the pot.

"Brother Zhu, don't decline anymore. The mountains and fields are full of pine and bamboo. You must already have excellent verses prepared. If you have too many good poems and can't decide, why not write them down and let us help you choose?" Guo Ziyu urged once again, his eyes full of teasing amusement.

This wasn't just asking Zhu Ping'an to write one poem anymore—it was pressuring him to write several.

With Guo Ziyu taking the lead, more people joined in, and the voices of encouragement grew louder.

Zhu Ping'an looked at Guo Ziyu and inwardly scoffed: Do you really think I can't write poetry? I could compose dozens of poems about bamboo, pine, and plum blossoms in mere minutes—do you believe me?

Well, you asked for it.

Under Guo Ziyu's persistent urging, Zhu Ping'an took up paper and brush. Amid the crowd's uproar, he began writing:

"Bamboo"

Firmly clinging to the green mountains, never letting go,

Its roots planted deep within the fractured stone.

Enduring countless hardships, yet remaining strong,

No matter which way the winds may blow—north, south, east, or west.

As soon as the poem was completed, Guo Ziyu, who had been the loudest just moments ago, was left speechless. It was as if this poem had been written specifically to slap him in the face—and yet, it did so in the most elegant and dignified manner!

"Planted deep within the fractured stone" seemed to respond to those who belittled Zhu Ping'an for coming from a poor mountain village.

"Enduring countless hardships, yet remaining strong, no matter which way the winds may blow" was almost a direct reflection of himself!

However, this was merely Guo Ziyu's interpretation. To anyone else, the poem was brimming with resilience, unyielding spirit, and an indomitable will...

"Excellent! Brother Zhu, you truly remain silent until you amaze the world with one strike!" A scholar sitting at the same table could not stop praising the poem, utterly astounded.

"Firmly clinging to the green mountains, never letting go—its roots planted deep within the fractured stone. Enduring countless hardships, yet remaining strong—no matter which way the winds may blow."

The imagery was so powerful that just thinking about it filled one with strength!

"This poem possesses such remarkable integrity—it rivals Yu Gong's Ode to Lime! "

The surrounding scholars, all men of talent, were deeply impressed. Compared to Zhu Ping'an's poem, the earlier Bamboo poem by Scholar Cao suddenly seemed lackluster.

Hearing the admiration from those around him, Guo Ziyu felt his face grow hot. However, he was now stuck in a difficult position and couldn't back down. Left with no choice, he forced himself to praise the poem and once again urged Zhu Ping'an.

"Marvelous, absolutely marvelous! If this one poem alone is already so breathtaking, then the other works that Brother Zhu found difficult to choose from must be even more extraordinary! Don't be stingy—share them with us!"

Fine, I'll admit this poem is incredible, but I refuse to believe you can write another one just as good! Guo Ziyu thought to himself.

Zhu Ping'an glanced at Guo Ziyu, then picked up his brush once more.

You don't believe me? Well, too bad—you're about to be disappointed. Since I'm already feeling irritated, and you keep pushing, I'll make sure to prove you wrong!

"Bamboo"

Lying in my humble chamber, I listen to the rustling bamboo,

It sounds like the cries of my suffering neighbors.

Though we are but insignificant juniors,

Every branch and leaf carries our shared concern.

As soon as this poem was completed, the crowd fell silent. Their eyes were now filled with deep respect for the young man seated at the lowest position in the gathering.

This poem completely shattered the previous trend of merely praising bamboo's elegance and resilience—it took an entirely new perspective. No, rather, it was a genuine expression from the heart.

It elevated the entire discussion to another level!

From bamboo to human emotion—it rose to the realm of worrying for the people before worrying for oneself!

If the first poem had already dominated the gathering with its unyielding spirit, this second poem ascended to the level of concern for the people's suffering. Many can recite "worrying for the people before worrying for oneself," but who actually practices it? Among all the bamboo-themed poems today, this one was like a thunderclap shattering the heavens!

"With two such poems, it would be impossible for me to choose between them."

Someone sighed in admiration.

Guo Ziyu was now completely dumbfounded, standing frozen in place. His face flushed red, his ears burning. How did he actually manage to write something like this?!