

Rise 272

Chapter 272: Unfortunate Times

Candidates were searched one after another, from the dim pre-dawn to the rising of the red sun.

Such searches were not without effect. One candidate ahead of Zhu Ping'an was caught with a concealed cheat sheet during the inspection. His method of cheating involved his quilt, which was densely covered in tiny characters on the inside, blending seamlessly with the elegant black floral pattern of the fabric. It was unclear how many eight-legged essays he had copied down—each matching the examination themes. However, the inspection officer still managed to detect the deception.

At the moment of being caught, the examinee collapsed to the ground as if struck by lightning, trembling all over.

“Drag him out, send him to the Commandant’s Office for interrogation. He is to wear a cangue for a month and be punished severely!”

The middle-aged proctor waved his hand sternly, and four soldiers came forward. They roughly lifted the collapsed man off the ground, ignoring his tearful pleas for mercy, and dragged him away.

After this candidate who tried to cheat was dealt with, Zhu Ping'an stepped forward for his inspection.

Naturally, Zhu Ping'an had no issues and passed the search smoothly, entering the examination compound.

However, the two soldiers in charge of inspecting him were somewhat disgruntled. When they later recalled the scene days afterward, they couldn't help but take a deep breath, gazing at the sky with a profound look:

"We just remember that it was a very cold day, yet we were sweating."

What actually happened that day was that they turned into human food processors. Zhu Ping'an had carried a large assortment of snacks: preserved fruits, dried meats, cooked food, and even a big bundle of hand-pulled noodles. The two soldiers had to use specialized food inspection tools to slice and check everything, cutting for so long that their hands were sore. The effort was so intense that even in the cold, they broke out in a sweat.

After passing the inspection, Zhu Ping'an entered the examination compound and searched for his assigned seat according to his exam tag.

Compared to the Gongyuan (examination compound) in Yingtian, the one in the capital was slightly smaller. Rows upon rows of simple wooden-earth structures stood tightly packed—over a hundred rows, with each row containing a hundred booths. Booths were numbered according to the Thousand Character Classic beginning with "Tian Di Xuan Huang" (Heaven and Earth, Mysterious and Yellow), and the term "Tian Character Number One" originated from this system. Each small booth was called a changwu (exam room), or kaohao (exam number), and was also referred to as a haofang, a naming method similar to that used in prisons.

Zhu Ping'an located his assigned booth according to his exam tag. Unfortunately, his luck was terrible this time—the location he was assigned to was known by all as the dreaded "stinking booth," meaning it was right next to the toilet.

This booth differed slightly from the ones used in the provincial-level exams. While the dimensions were the same—five feet long, four feet wide, and eight feet tall (just tall enough to stand upright, wide enough to touch the opposite wall with one arm extended, and relatively deep)—the setup inside varied. This booth had a kang (a raised platform bed used in northern China), which was for sleeping. Though it wasn't very spacious, as long as one lay with their head inward, they could stretch their legs straight—though maybe just off the edge. This kang also doubled as a seat for writing, and overall felt more comfortable than the booths in the Yingtian compound. There was also a long wooden plank on the kang, serving as both desk and dining table. Additionally, there were a brazier for heating and a few candles.

This booth had no door. Zhu Ping'an walked in directly, unpacked his belongings, organized them, and then took out his pot, added water, sprinkled in seasonings, added noodles, meat chunks, and a few cabbage leaves.

Then, he used a portable stand to set up the pot and began boiling it with bubbling sounds.

Since he had gotten up at chou hour (around 1–3 a.m.), and hadn't eaten or drunk a drop since, and given that his booth was next to the toilet—now still unused—he decided to take the opportunity to cook something quickly. Once people began using the toilet, the booth would live up to its name and become unbearable.

Bubbling...The little pot of noodle soup with meat and cabbage boiled away, steam rising and fragrance wafting, spreading far.

The invigilating soldier nearby was nearly at his breaking point. He had supervised exams for many years, but this was the first time he'd seen a candidate behave like this after being assigned to the stinking booth. He had never seen anyone start cooking immediately after entering!

Usually, examinees assigned to this booth would be retching and pale-faced, on the verge of collapse! But this candidate had barely warmed his seat before starting to cook—unbelievable. The proctor felt like his dog-eyes had been blinded.

Chief examiner Xu Jie, accompanied by a few co-examiners, was making his customary inspection of the grounds—partly to enforce discipline from the outset, and partly to encourage the staff.

As Xu Jie and his group neared the stinking booth area, they suddenly heard a loud slurping sound.

At this, all their expressions changed.

This was the infamous stinking booth—why was there such a sound?! In the past, this area was filled with the mournful sounds of examinees; today's strange noise was out of place.

You must understand: the examination venue had no sanitation facilities to speak of. At the end of the alley between booths, there was a makeshift shack housing a bucket toilet. For three full days, nearby examinees all relieved themselves there. The smell was overpowering, with flies buzzing about. The odor alone was enough to make one suffer, let alone take an exam.

And the “stinking booth” was right next to this toilet—its direct neighbor.

Out of curiosity, Xu Jie and the others took a few more steps forward.

Then they saw a scene that shattered their worldview: a chubby teenage boy, about fifteen years old, was inside the booth holding a small iron pot and slurping down noodles with great gusto. He was eating with relish, sweat beading on his forehead from the effort.

Meanwhile, the supervising soldier nearby was deathly pale and visibly traumatized, as if scarred for life.

Seriously?! It’s already a miracle he isn’t crying from the stench—how can he be eating so heartily?

This stark contrast made the scene unforgettable for Xu Jie. He would remember this boy, who calmly and comfortably ate noodles in the stinking booth, like it was nothing.

To remain composed in such a foul place, eating and drinking as usual—

This was no ordinary person! Either a complete fool, or a rare genius!

Interesting. Very good. I, Xu Jie, will remember this person.

Zhu Ping'an was so focused on eating that by the time he noticed, Xu Jie and the examiners had already walked away.

Since he had woken up around 2 a.m., his sleep was severely lacking. After eating, Zhu Ping'an quickly cleaned his utensils, put everything away neatly, tidied up the kang, spread a fur mat on it, lay down, pulled a thick rabbit-fur blanket over himself, and drifted off into a sweet sleep.

Outside, the supervising soldier was speechless. Eating and then sleeping—in the stinking booth, and in broad daylight no less. He had never seen a candidate like this before.

When Xu Jie and the examiners made their return trip and passed by again, they immediately saw Zhu Ping'an sleeping deeply under his thick blanket, snoring loudly.

Assigned to the stinking booth and sleeping soundly after a meal—clearly, this candidate had given up on the exam.

Some of the examiners chuckled and shook their heads at the sight, their gazes toward Zhu Ping'an full of ridicule.

Sigh, looks like this one falls into the former category after all. I misjudged him, Xu Jie thought with a slight shake of his head, feeling a bit disappointed.