

Rise 333

Chapter 333: A Disciple's Stab

"Yesterday's squalor is nothing worth boasting of; today, my thoughts stretch boundless. Riding high on the spring breeze, my horse's hooves fly swift—within a single day I behold all the blossoms of Chang'an."

Stepping out of the marquis' residence, Zhu Ping'an immediately caught sight of Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, looking every bit like the poem described—buoyant in spirit, proud as if borne aloft by the spring breeze. Both men had always been elegant in bearing, but today their radiance outshone the past. Though neither had snatched the top spot in the examinations as Zhu Ping'an had, each had nonetheless achieved fine results in the metropolitan exam: Wang Shizhen had placed eighty-second, Zhang Siwei a little behind at ninety-third—both securing positions within the top hundred.

"Zihou, at last you've come out," the two greeted him with smiles as they stepped forward.

"Brother Ziwei, Brother Wensheng—you've waited long. Today I'll host, food and drink in plenty." Zhu Ping'an returned their smiles, offering an apologetic bow.

"We'll remember that," Zhang Siwei chuckled, clapping his hands. "But not today. Another day, perhaps."

"Why so? That's hardly your style. Last time the results were posted, you two devoured the feast like starved gluttons, not sparing a single morsel. 'Mock not the farmer's cloudy wine, for in a year of plenty he has pork and fowl enough to share'. Today, I've even brought coin for a fat duck." Zhu Ping'an grinned, tossing the heavy purse in his hand.

“Zihou, are you truly ignorant, or just pretending?” Wang Shizhen rolled his eyes.

“What do you mean?” Zhu Ping’an looked genuinely puzzled.

“Ah, Zihou, quick-witted though you are, with a mind as if carved with nine apertures, yet when it comes to official customs, you remain woefully naïve.” Wang Shizhen shook his head, then revealed their purpose.

“Now that we’ve passed the examination, we must, by rule, pay our respects to our chief examiners. These past days you hadn’t sought us out, so today we came to fetch you—to visit our zuoshi together.”

“Among scholars of the realm,” Zhang Siwei continued, following Wang Shizhen’s words, “some hail from hundreds of li away, others from thousands, speaking in differing tongues, knowing not each other’s names. Yet once they succeed in the examinations, a web of ties is spun: the chief examiners are called zuoshi, the assistant examiners fangshi. Those who share the same examination year are tongnian; the sons of one’s tongnian are nian nephews. The sons of one’s zuoshi and fangshi are shixiong, elder brothers by courtesy. To the examiners, we are their mensheng, disciples. Those whom the disciples bring to success are mensun, and in turn, they honor the examiner’s examiner as grand master.”

“Oh—so that’s the custom. A mensheng tie.” Zhu Ping’an’s eyes lit with belated realization. Indeed, it was his oversight.

At their words, memories stirred. Of course—this system of examiner-disciple ties was something he had long understood in his former life.

In the Ming dynasty, when the imperial examinations reached their zenith, such bonds between examiners and disciples became more entrenched than ever. Competition was ferocious; the number of candidates who met the standard far outstripped the actual slots. Success carried with it much of chance, and so those

fortunate enough to be selected inevitably felt immense gratitude toward their examiners. Thus arose the practice: the examiner was revered as zuozhu, the student calling himself mensheng. By convention, candidates recognized both the chief and assistant examiners as such. The chief was zuoshi, the assistant fangshi.

Once the results were posted, the first duty of every mensheng was to deliver a calling card, the mensheng tie, along with visits and gifts, thereby cementing this relationship.

“Many thanks, Brother Ziwei, Brother Wensheng. I nearly made a grave blunder.” Zhu Ping’an clasped his hands, feigning sudden enlightenment.

Yet inwardly, he could not help feeling a measure of disdain. This whole system of examiner and disciple—was it not all rooted in a single examination? One side examiner, the other candidate: the examiner but followed the Emperor’s mandate, today’s equivalent of a government post; the candidate but sat for the test, succeeding by ability, though chance and other factors played a role. Passing was one’s due right. There ought to have been no question of favor or gratitude. Yet somehow, at some forgotten moment, someone had woven this into personal obligation: if you select me, you are my benefactor; if I am chosen, I am your disciple. What should have been a matter of public duty now demanded lifelong gratitude.

In the dynasty’s early days, the examiner-disciple bond had been founded on righteousness. Later, it grew increasingly bound by interest, especially toward the dynasty’s decline, when such ties became fuel for factional strife and corruption.

Still, Zhu Ping’an was not pedantic. For all its flaws, there were advantages. It is said: with allies in the court, matters proceed with ease. A zuoshi could offer guidance, protection, advancement. And their own examiner was none other than Xu Jie—the very man who had toppled Yan Song, a true power to reckon with. If such a thigh was there to cling to, why not?

Thus, Zhu Ping'an went with Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen to present their mensheng ties and gifts, visiting Xu Jie and Yan Maoqing to establish formally their ties as disciples.

As for the assistant examiners who had individually admitted them, those visits would follow later.

Naturally, one could not arrive empty-handed. Zhang Siwei led the others to an elegant ink shop, selecting fine ink as their gift.

Ink was indispensable to writing. Its quality affected not only calligraphy and painting but also determined how long the work endured without fading. Good ink was cherished, a true collector's treasure. As the inkstone was counted among the Four Treasures of the Study, gifting ink was both refined and appropriate.

"This ink is called Spring Green upon the Pond, named after the line in Feng Yansi's *At the Golden Gate*: 'The wind rises suddenly, ruffling the spring waters of the pond'. It is among the finest of inks. Its design is ingenious, form exquisite, its calligraphy flowing and forceful. Its waves curl with a dragon-child at play, carefree, lifting the spirit beyond the mundane. This is the most sought-after ink of the age—none compares."

So Zhang Siwei explained, having studied ink with some expertise.

Zhu Ping'an, curious, took up the Spring Green ink. Round in shape, edged in relief, coated in gold. On one side, the raised inscription: Spring Green upon the Pond. On the other, a carved scene: from the sea's waves rose a coiled dragon-child, winding like a serpent. Along the edges, the inscriptions Made at Shuiyun Residence and By Xiao Huayi Shi.

The shop boy carefully chipped off a sample, no larger than a fingernail, and ground it in the inkstone. Then he offered brush, ink, paper, and stone for them to test.

The ink flowed smooth as jade, carrying a faint fragrance. As neither of his companions reached for the brush, Zhu Ping'an smiled faintly, stepped forward, dipped his brush, and wrote the single character mo—"ink." The strokes leapt alive, more fluid and vigorous than before.

"Zihou, splendid calligraphy!" Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen praised unreservedly.

"I do so enjoy your honesty," Zhu Ping'an quipped, setting down the brush with a grin.

The two could not help laughing, shaking their heads at him.

After their laughter, each purchased several pieces of Spring Green upon the Pond, the shop boy wrapping them in fine boxes. With gifts in hand, they set off toward Xu Jie's residence.