

Rise 80

Chapter 80: The Examination

Outside, it was pitch black. This moment before dawn was the darkest, coldest time. The students and scholars who usually slept soundly in the inn had all tidied themselves up and left with their belongings.

Whether they were moths to a flame or phoenixes reborn, today marked the beginning of a day that would decide their fates. The county examination in February of the Great Ming had begun. The scholars stepping out of the inn were either anxious and uneasy or filled with ambition; of course, some wore expressions devoid of emotion, calm and unperturbed.

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an also stepped out, carrying a heap of belongings as if he were moving. His travel bag contained a rabbit fur blanket and a thin mat; he carried a large bamboo basket filled with a variety of food and drink—dried fruits, pastries, cooked meats, marinated dishes, and a water cup, among other items. Naturally, ink, brushes, paper, and inkstones were also indispensable.

At just thirteen years old, Zhu Ping'an was not very tall, and with all these items, he was almost hidden from view, resembling a clumsy turtle burdened with its shell.

Other scholars heading out saw Zhu Ping'an and mocked him for bringing too much. Most of them had packed light, though some carried quite a few items; none brought as much as Zhu Ping'an did.

Zhu Ping'an ignored the ridicule from his fellow scholars.

As he passed through the main hall, Zhu Ping'an was surprised to find his uncle, Zhu Shouren, leisurely enjoying a lavish feast with a few other scholars, showing no intention of departing. The other scholars traveling with Zhu Ping'an looked on enviously, while Uncle Zhu Shouren savored the attention and envy from everyone.

"Zhi'er, there's no need to be nervous. If you don't do well this time, it's no matter; just consider it an experience. There will be plenty of opportunities in the future," he said.

Uncle Zhu Shouren, basking in the admiration of the crowd, looked even more pleased upon seeing his nephew Zhu Ping'an, laden with a heap of belongings. He adopted a tone of a mentor.

It was not even time for the exam, yet he was already speaking of failing and gaining experience. Zhu Ping'an, looking at his well-meaning uncle, felt a rush of a thousand grass-mud horses galloping past in his heart.

"Uncle, why haven't you left yet?" Zhu Ping'an asked lightly.

Hearing Zhu Ping'an's question, Uncle Zhu Shouren seemed as if he had just downed three bowls of liquor, nearly floating, his face flushed with excitement, yet he feigned indifference.

"I'm already a Tongsheng; I don't need to take part in the county or provincial exams anymore. I'm only waiting for the academy exam," he said, stroking his beard proudly, waiting to see Zhu Ping'an's envy and jealousy.

"Oh, then I'll go first," Zhu Ping'an replied indifferently, unaffected by his uncle's pride. He simply shouldered his bag and followed the crowd out.

"Oh?"

Uncle Zhu Shouren, anticipating Zhu Ping'an's envy, stared blankly at his nephew's retreating figure.

Zhu Ping'an headed with the crowd towards the examination site, which was located in a market not far from the county office. During the examination period, the market was closed and cleaned up, and a large examination tent was set up facing south. On the southern side of the tent, there were two entrances flanked by wooden fences. Inside the tent was a spacious courtyard with a main entrance, commonly referred to as the Dragon Gate. This courtyard served as the examination venue for the candidates, divided into two sections: the front area for candidates to wait and the rear area with several rows of tables and chairs for answering the questions. The examiners sat on the west side, while the candidates lined up to wait for their names to be called, allowing them to go forward to answer the questions.

In front of the examination tent, five teams of bailiffs stood at the main entrance, inspecting the students' credentials and their belongings very carefully: bedding could not have linings, socks had to be single-layered, clothing had to have seams, inkstones could not be too thick, and pastries had to be cut open...

The bailiffs inspected so meticulously to prevent cheating and avoid future accountability.

Many of the items brought by the candidates in front were found to be unsatisfactory, but fortunately, none were caught with cheating materials. As long as the items were not related to cheating, candidates could leave behind any unsatisfactory belongings and still enter.

After so many years of the imperial examination, the penalties for cheating were severe. At least during the time Zhu Ping'an waited in line, no one was discovered with any cheating materials.

The bailiff's search resembled modern security checks. All the items Zhu Ping'an brought were opened and inspected, with the cooked meats and dried fruits cut into bite-sized pieces by the bailiffs.

Among all these items, nothing was deemed unsatisfactory. Not only were the watching students surprised, but the inspecting bailiffs were also slightly taken aback.

Upon entering through the main gate, a minor official who was somewhat literate checked Zhu Ping'an's identity and credentials. After verification, he led Zhu Ping'an to an open area where four scholars, around twenty years old, were already waiting. These were likely the four candidates recommended by Old Master Sun. These four held themselves in high regard, engaged in conversation with one another, and did not acknowledge Zhu Ping'an, fully aware that he was merely brought in by Old Master Sun to make up the numbers.

Zhu Ping'an observed their behavior; his initial intention to greet them vanished, and he stood awkwardly waiting.

As dawn approached, the county magistrate arrived in his official robe, causing a stir among the waiting scholars, which made it somewhat challenging for the bailiffs to maintain order.

There were too many people, and Zhu Ping'an, being young and short, couldn't see what the county magistrate looked like.

From the conversations around him, Zhu Ping'an learned that the county magistrate had generally delivered some encouraging words and then discussed the details of the exam, stating that there would be four sessions in this county examination. In fact, it could have been five sessions depending on the county official's decision, and Zhu Ping'an was glad to hear that it would be four sessions this time.

Afterward, as the county magistrate left, the officials began calling out names. Several bailiffs loudly recited the magistrate's words for all the candidates to hear.

After a long wait, Zhu Ping'an finally heard his name. He walked inside with the other scholars recommended by Old Master Sun.

In the courtyard stood a paper lantern with a sign, making it easy to see. Zhu Ping'an entered the main hall with the others and bowed to the person who appeared to be the examiner.

"Li Lanshan from Shanghe Village, recommended by the scholar Sun Hongzhi," one of the four stepped forward, receiving an exam paper and announcing loudly.

Then Zhu Ping'an heard Old Master Sun's voice: "Scholar Sun Hongzhi recommends."

Zhu Ping'an looked up and saw Old Master Sun sitting in a corner of the hall, accompanied by several others.

After hearing Old Master Sun's confirmation, the examiner nodded in acknowledgment, and a minor official led Li Lanshan to the examination area.

Zhu Ping'an was the last among the five to announce his recommendation. After Old Master Sun confirmed, Zhu Ping'an didn't even get a chance to exchange glances with him before being led away by the minor official to take the exam.

It was understandable; with so many candidates and endorsing scholars, they all had to go through this process, and time was tight.

Zhu Ping'an's exam paper had a seating number on it: Ding Chou. This was arranged according to the heavenly stems and earthly branches, but Zhu Ping'an, who was used to Arabic numerals, found it quite confusing. Fortunately, a minor official was there to guide him to his seat; otherwise, finding it would have been a hassle.

Inside the exam hall, there were ten rows of simple seating—just a long table and a chair for each candidate, nothing more.

Zhu Ping'an sat down, carefully arranged his writing materials, and then opened the exam paper.

The exam paper had red lines forming a grid, consisting of over ten sheets. Each page had twelve lines, with twenty characters per line. There were also two blank sheets for drafting.

However, he did not see the exam questions, which puzzled Zhu Ping'an. Just as he was about to raise his hand to ask the examiner, he noticed several bailiffs walking around the hall with lanterns, and two of them were holding up a large wooden board high above their heads, which displayed the exam questions for this session.

Now he understood, Zhu Ping'an thought to himself in realization.