

## Rise 88

### Chapter 88: The Surprising Immortal Poetry Gathering (I)

Anqing Prefecture's city exudes an extraordinary atmosphere, like a tiger lying in the flatlands, with its tall city gate tower resembling a tiger's mouth, swallowing any passing pedestrians and vehicles.

If Huaining County is affluent, then Anqing Prefecture's city is bustling.

Even at night, it is vibrant and lively, with the night market filled with crowds, making the scene resemble a city that never sleeps.

Unless one truly experiences this era, it's hard to imagine how prosperous such a dynasty could be. This is merely a county city; above it are provincial capitals and the imperial capital. It's difficult to fathom the grandeur of the capital beneath the emperor's feet. Of course, this prosperity has an ancient charm, distinct from the modern type, yet it is even more awe-inspiring.

The provincial examination is being held in Anqing Prefecture's city, where students who passed the county examination gather in one place. With the vastness of the region, the petty habit of literati looking down on one another becomes apparent. They disregard the saying "there is no first in literature, no second in martial arts," and the students from each county and town band together, looking down upon those from other places. Open and covert competitions never cease.

Zhu Ping'an, a student ranked among the top fifty on the top list from Huaining County, has received special attention from students of other counties and towns. Thus, the poem about being bitten by a snake while

hearing birds chirp, as well as his behavior of eating lunch and napping during the exam, and living in a shabby room, were all brought to light.

Then, the students from other counties and towns became excited, as if they had drunk half a jin of old wine.

"Even unable to compose a poem, eating and drinking during the exam and taking a nap—hahaha! He can even get into the top ranks in Huaining County. If this were in our county, he wouldn't even pass the first round of exams. The standards in Huaining County are evidently at this level."

Isn't this just a target bestowed upon us by heaven?

There are only so many spots available through the provincial examination in Anqing Prefecture. If Huaining County has a poor reputation, the governor would naturally consider this, giving our other counties more opportunities.

Thus, the eager students from other counties began to inquire about Zhu Ping'an's information, including his appearance and preferences, waiting for a chance to make Huaining County a laughingstock.

With diligent effort paying off, just on the fifth day after Zhu Ping'an settled in Anqing Prefecture's city, while he was being pulled by his uncle and a few villagers to meet a friend of his uncle at a restaurant, he was unexpectedly blocked by several students from other counties.

His uncle's friend was an acquaintance from the county city, a mentor who had been the county school instructor. His uncle's friend had also passed the county and provincial exams, becoming a child scholar, but had repeatedly failed the imperial examination. Since child scholars do not have to participate in county or

provincial exams, his uncle's friend had been enjoying life in Anqing Prefecture, waiting to go to the provincial capital for the imperial examination.

The restaurant was a well-known establishment in Anqing Prefecture, named "Jingxian Tower," located in a prime area of Anqing Prefecture. It was grand in scale, lavishly decorated, with exquisite furnishings inside, where elegantly dressed maidens and servants moved about continuously, attending to the guests ascending the tower.

As Zhu Ping'an entered Jingxian Tower with his uncle and the others, he suddenly heard a joyful cheer and was promptly blocked.

"Finding you is like stepping on iron shoes without a place to seek. Aren't these a few great talents from Huaining County?"

"Just in time! The poetry gathering of the students from Taihu, Wangjiang, and other counties is in full swing. What's missing is you Huaining folks; encountering all of you at this moment is truly like finding sweet rain after a long drought."

Several young scholars, holding folding fans and dressed elegantly, blocked Zhu Ping'an and his companions' paths, insisting on escorting them upstairs.

Downstairs was the human realm; upstairs was paradise.

As Zhu Ping'an went upstairs, he happened to see a singer performing the red sleeve dance. She was light as a swallow, with graceful steps swaying in the breeze. Suddenly, her water sleeves flicked open, dancing in the air like a celestial maiden descending to the mortal realm, her willow waist twisting as she stepped lightly, resembling an immortal touched by the mortal world, stirring up feelings of spring.

Completely different from modern performances, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but glance a few more times in curiosity.

But in the eyes of those with ulterior motives, this is simply a country bumpkin from a remote area who has never seen the world. Just a singer, yet they are already mesmerized, unable to ascend to any grand occasion.

Sure enough, what we inquired about matched exactly. The scholars from other counties upstairs exchanged knowing smiles.

"Ahem, we have come this time to meet friends; we'll come again next time to join in the poetry gathering," Uncle Zhu Shouren said, noticing that there were several tables of scholars from other counties upstairs. He felt something was amiss and politely declined.

A scholarly youth from Jiangning County laughed heartily upon hearing this: "We are here to make friends through poetry; everyone here is a friend. Where are your friends? We can call them all over."

The other scholars at the table also crowded around, pulling and tugging, forcibly surrounding Zhu Ping'an and the others at the large central table, greeting them with warmth as if they were long-lost relatives, especially casting curious glances at Zhu Ping'an, as if he were a rare treasure.

Uncle's friend was also enthusiastically invited out from a private room. The scholars from other counties were eager for a larger crowd; the more people there were, the more embarrassing it would be for Huaining County, and the commotion would draw more consideration from the local magistrate.

Uncle's friend was a stout man with a small pair of eyes that were so squinted they seemed to vanish. He appeared to be someone who had indulged excessively.

After everyone exchanged greetings, the stout man sat next to Uncle and began whispering with him and the others, ending with several odd glances thrown at Zhu Ping'an. Then Uncle and several local villagers' faces turned slightly awkward, their gazes toward Zhu Ping'an filled with blame and complaint.

It seemed they already knew what the scholars from the other counties were truly up to.

When soldiers come, generals block; when water comes, earth covers.

Zhu Ping'an, as if nothing were amiss, began to deal with the plate of drunken crabs in front of him. He had long drooled over the drunken crabs from Shanghai while watching "A Bite of China," but had never had the opportunity to try them until now. With the crabs right in front of him, how could he resist?

Indeed, as the rumors suggested, he was greedy and a glutton.

The scholars from several other counties cast sideways glances at Zhu Ping'an, who was using both hands to devour two large crabs in an unrefined manner.

Uncle Zhu Shouren and the others also wanted to distance themselves from Zhu Ping'an, their faces flushed with embarrassment.

The poetry gathering at the Jingxian Building was something that the scholars from other counties like Tongcheng, Taihu, and Wangjiang had prepared long in advance. It was not specifically aimed at Zhu Ping'an and the other scholars from Huaining County. Initially, they just wanted to become acquainted with each other before targeting the scholars from Huaining County. Unexpectedly, hearing that Zhu Ping'an and a few other Huaining County scholars were heading toward the Jingxian Building, the scholars from other counties conspired to seize the day and let them embarrass themselves.

Thus, some went downstairs to block the entrance, lest Zhu Ping'an and the others merely pass by; others went to call for people, believing that joy is best shared among many, and such good fortune must be appreciated by more people; while some used personal connections to visit several well-known scholars in the county, hoping they would come and offer their insights for added credibility.

Since the messengers hadn't returned yet, the scholars from other counties held back their frustrations but planned to unleash a thunderous blow on Zhu Ping'an and the others once everyone had arrived.

So now, everyone was enjoying lively exchanges, and the atmosphere was very pleasant, which they referred to as warming up the scene.

With singing and dancing in full swing, the tension was palpable.