

## Rise 114

### Chapter 114: Longing for Home

Returning from Anqing Prefecture to Xiahe Village, a journey of a hundred miles, was not something that could be done in a day. It was best to return to the inn and plan further.

Amidst the wind and rain, Zhu Ping'an returned to the inn, drenched through and through.

"Ah, sir, why didn't you bring an umbrella when you went out? Please, come in quickly." The shop assistant, who had been sheltering from the rain under the eaves at the door, saw Zhu Ping'an trudging through the wind and rain and immediately turned pale with concern. He hurriedly opened the door, urging him to come inside.

There weren't many people eating in the hall, as most guests had stayed in their rooms because of the wind and rain. The meals that had been laid out earlier had already been cleared away, which was to be expected.

"Young Master Zhu, you're drenched through! Quickly change into some dry clothes. I'll have the shop assistant bring you a bowl of ginger sugar water. If you need anything else, just let us know." The innkeeper, seeing Zhu Ping'an drenched and entering the inn, quickly walked forward, handing him a dry towel and instructing the shop assistant to prepare ginger soup and other essentials. Zhu Ping'an was the first scholar staying in the inn, which made the innkeeper feel quite proud among the neighboring inns, so he had to make sure to take good care of him.

Zhu Ping'an, wet and cold, didn't bother with pleasantries. He accepted the dry towel and bowed, saying, "Thank you for your trouble, innkeeper."

As he dried his head and face, he walked toward his room. Just as he entered, the shop assistant had already delivered the ginger sugar water and some simple food, and the bathwater was also ready. After thanking the assistant, Zhu Ping'an drank the ginger soup, took a hot bath, changed into dry clothes, and then ate the food brought by the assistant, stretching his back and feeling much more comfortable.

The wind howled and the rain poured, so he couldn't set off immediately. After neatly packing his belongings into his travel bag, he sat at the desk and read for a while.

The books in his bag had become a bit damp, despite his best efforts to protect them. The pages had stuck together, and it took him quite a bit of time to carefully separate them. Fortunately, the calligraphy book given to him by the old fisherman was of excellent paper quality, and the ink had not been affected.

The sound of the wind accompanied Zhu Ping'an's flipping of the pages, while the thunder and lightning outside matched the dim light of the oil lamp. The night deepened as Zhu Ping'an's brush danced across the paper, soaring freely in the realm of ink.

Zhu Ping'an sat by the window, quietly enjoying his calligraphy book, unaware that several hundred meters away, the commotion at Zui Jun Lou—caused by the male revelers—was so loud that it nearly shook the roof. The constant ferment of "Mulian Ci" and the schoolgirl's veil being lifted, revealing her charming face...

By evening, the room had become too dark to read without lighting a candle. At that moment, Zhu Ping'an's drunk uncle and several villagers staggered upstairs, knocking loudly on his door.

When Zhu Ping'an opened the door, he was immediately hit by the strong smell of alcohol mixed with the earthy scent of mud. It seemed that his uncle and the others had slipped in the mud, with dirt smeared across their faces.

"Tsk, tsk, it's such a shame you left so early... the girl at Zui Jun Lou, the female scholar, if she had added a little more or less, it would have been just right; if she had worn a little more makeup, she would have looked too white; if she had used too much red, she would have looked too red; her eyebrows like green feathers, her skin like white snow; her waist as slender as silk, her teeth like pearls; a smile that could confuse Yangcheng and mesmerize Xiaocai..." Uncle Zhu Shouren, with half his face covered in mud, exposed his white teeth and clucked his tongue, lamenting that Zhu Ping'an had missed seeing the female scholar's true appearance.

How could he be quoting such crass lines?

Zhu Ping'an felt somewhat speechless, though his uncle was relatively better than his friends. His uncle's chubby friend had collapsed to the ground, snoring loudly.

"Yeah, it's so... beautiful, what a shame. But, hehe, it turned out to be our lucky break..." One of the villagers slurred his words, gesturing wildly. Anyone who didn't know the situation would have thought he had some interesting encounter with the female scholar.

"The female scholar originally wanted to invite you to her room to play the zither and drink wine. Since you weren't there, who else but us—your fellow villagers—could go? Thanks to Brother Zhu, we went in your place to drink, hehe, the zither was beautiful, the girl was beautiful, and the wine was beautiful..." Another villager leaned against the door frame, grinning like an idiot. Even though they only listened to some music and drank a bit of wine, being in such close proximity to the female scholar was already enough to brag about in front of others.

Zhu Xiong must be referring to my eldest uncle; only he would behave like this.

"All expenses today are being shared by everyone. An Ge'er, do not leave, stay here with us for the exam preparation..."

"Zhi'er, tomorrow I will help you review your studies and discuss the Spring and Autumn Annals..."

Zhu Ping'an looked at them, swaying unsteadily, half-covered in mud and reeking of alcohol, declaring that he would prepare for the exam and review the Spring and Autumn Annals with his eldest uncle and the villagers, and could only smile.

They were continually disturbed by them until midnight, only being sent off with the help of the shop assistant.

"Tomorrow your uncle will help you review your studies..."

"Tomorrow, at the Zui Jun Tower, we will prepare for the provincial exam..."

The heavily intoxicated Da Bo and others, unable to tell north from south, were carried away by the shop assistant, still muttering incessantly.

The next day, the weather was beautiful, the wind had stopped, the rain had ceased, and the red sun rose in the east.

Zhu Ping'an rubbed his forehead and smiled wryly as he walked out of a "biao hang" (escort agency).

Dramas really do mislead people. He thought about the hundred-mile journey from Anqing Prefecture to Xiahe Village, with a complicated terrain and, unlike the modern era, the safety of ancient times was far from guaranteed. Even during the prosperous reign of Jiajing, there were always those who had bad intentions towards solo travelers. From what he had seen in dramas, where escort agencies would have people accompanying the convoy, such as in a certain movie with the Jinyiwei (Embroidered Uniform Guard), he searched for an escort agency in Anqing Prefecture. After searching for a long time, he couldn't find one. When he asked a passerby, they all shook their heads, not knowing about any escort agency, except for one person who pointed him to a location and said there was a "biao hang" there, though he wasn't sure if it was what Zhu Ping'an was referring to.

Zhu Ping'an actually knew this. A "biao hang" was a precursor to an escort agency. Escort agencies only appeared in the Qing dynasty, but the escort agency already existed in the Ming dynasty, and there was even a record of it in Jin Ping Mei (The Plum in the Golden Vase). He thought to himself that perhaps the drama just got the name wrong. Zhu Ping'an went to this escort agency to ask about any recent trips to Kaoshan Town.

Unexpectedly, he ended up in a bit of a joke.

First of all, the escort agency in the Ming dynasty only transported valuable goods and did not deal with ordinary items. Moreover, they never had a business of escorting people. Even if someone traveled with valuable goods, they would only take the owner of those goods along. They couldn't just take a stranger on the road without knowing their background. What if they led a wolf into the house?

Rich people naturally had their own bodyguards, while poor people traveled in groups of three or five, so they never needed an escort agency.

Thus, when Zhu Ping'an inquired, the people at the escort agency looked at him as though he were foolish.

However, he didn't go away empty-handed. The people at the escort agency told him to try asking at the carriage agency.

Zhu Ping'an awkwardly left the escort agency and went to the carriage agency. Coincidentally, the carriage agency was about to send a convoy of carriages to Kaoshan Town. With Zhu Ping'an added, the number of passengers was nearly enough. Zhu Ping'an paid a deposit of five coins and received a wooden token engraved with the image of a horse.

With everything ready, he just had to wait until tomorrow to go to the carriage agency, take a carriage to Kaoshan Town, and then he would be home.

His heart longed for his hometown.