

Rise 123

Chapter 123: The Arrival of the Plum Rain Season in Yingtian

Dark clouds covered the sky, and lightning, tearing through the heavens, cracked the ink-black sky with thunderous roars. The rain poured down in torrents, as if the heavens themselves had cracked open in response to the negligence of the Heavenly Marshal spying on Chang'e, letting the Milky Way spill out...

In the distance, a horse-drawn carriage covered with oiled cloth swayed through the storm, the horses drenched like water buffalo, panting heavily as they struggled through the muddy road.

"Young master, it's only three miles to Yingtian. The wind and rain are too heavy. Should we rest for a while until the storm subsides, then continue our journey?" The coachman, wearing a rain hat, turned around and asked from the driver's seat.

Perhaps the wind and rain were too loud, and the voice was too soft.

Inside the carriage, there was silence.

The coachman asked again, this time louder.

After a moment, a lazy, seemingly just-awoken voice came from inside, clumsy and youthful. "Oh, yes, yes, of course. If Brother Zhao decides, then it's fine."

Hearing this, the coachman chuckled and teased, "I really admire you, young master. Even in this kind of weather, you can still sleep soundly."

"The wind and rain are so rhythmic; I just listened and couldn't help but fall asleep," the voice inside the carriage explained, sounding a bit embarrassed.

"You jest, young master. While others can't sleep, I can. In the past, you would read in the carriage, but with this weather, reading is impossible, so you might as well rest. But to be able to sleep in such weather, I really admire you," the coachman said, stopping the carriage by the roadside. He began to cover the horses with a woven mat while continuing to chat with the young master inside.

The coachman, though fond of his horse, didn't dare to drive the carriage into the woods to take shelter from the rain. Instead, he had to stop by the side of the road for a brief respite.

"Brother Zhao, come inside to avoid the rain," the slightly plump, clumsy young master called out from the carriage.

The curtain of the carriage was lifted, and a chubby, somewhat naïve-looking young man poked his head out. He glanced at the torrential rain outside and said to the coachman standing outside.

With the flash of lightning, it became clear that the chubby, clumsy young man was none other than Zhu Ping'an, who had come to Yingtian for the imperial examination.

The coachman shook his head, "How could I? I'm drenched; I won't go inside."

Zhu Ping'an, half sticking out of the carriage, waved his hand dismissively. "It's fine. Brother Zhao, just leave your rain hat outside and come in. The luggage and books are already stored in my pack."

The coachman hesitated for a moment but, after Zhu Ping'an's repeated request, took off his rain hat and entered the carriage to rest for a while.

The carriage, in an almost coincidental twist of fate, was not a modern direct route. In the ancient Ming Dynasty, even for a carriage service, there was no guarantee of transportation to a specific destination. After changing carriages twice, Zhu Ping'an happened to encounter this coachman, who was transporting goods to Ying Tian. After a brief discussion, the coachman agreed to take him along, charging only a slightly reduced fare. In ancient times, due to the constraints of social etiquette, kind-hearted people seemed to be more common.

A river of smoke, the city full of wind and willow fluff. The rain during the plum season.

Outside the carriage, the fierce wind mixed with torrential rain, relentless and unyielding, falling without pause. Zhu Ping'an gazed out the carriage window at the world of water, and his impression of the southern plum rains grew stronger. Previously, he had only read about it in textbooks: In the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River, the weather during June and July is typically rainy and overcast, coinciding with the plum ripening season, which is why it is called "plum rain." This period is known as the plum rain season. Now, after several days of travel, Zhu Ping'an felt the plum rain firsthand. The weather had not been sunny once.

From the morning until well into the afternoon, the wind and rain hadn't stopped, only slightly easing. Coachman Zhao, donning his rain hat again, drove the carriage along the official road, continuing the journey.

The road was muddy and flooded with water, causing the carriage to sway and move slowly. Even the ancient official roads couldn't be compared to modern roads, even those poorly constructed.

After walking nearly three miles, it took more than half an hour—just over an hour in modern terms—before they arrived in Yingtian, which is now Nanjing.

As the carriage door curtain was lifted, Zhu Ping'an was immediately struck by the towering city of Yingtian.

Majestic, grand, and imposing...

The city walls of Yingtian resembled a giant dragon, winding and coiling to guard the city. Stretching endlessly for several dozen kilometers, the walls appeared newly built and looked even fresher under the downpour. The city walls of Yingtian were completed only towards the end of the Hongwu period, making them the largest walls Zhu Ping'an had ever seen, even more grand than the walls of Xi'an. At this moment, though, the city of Shuntian (Beijing) should have been the largest, but this didn't diminish Zhu Ping'an's awe.

Especially at that moment, rainwater poured from the city into the drainage outlets of the city walls, flowing out through several protruding stone dragon heads along the walls. The volume of water was immense, and the water pouring from the dragon mouths resembled a real dragon spitting water. It was an extraordinarily spectacular sight, adding to Zhu Ping'an's awe.

Even in such weather, there were still many pedestrians and vehicles coming and going outside the city gates. Some scholars, holding paper umbrellas, marveled at the "dragon spitting water" and, undeterred by the downpour, became inspired, leaving behind works of poetry. The only pity was for the attendants and servants, who had to shield the paper and ink from the rain.

After entering Yingtian city, due to the delay caused by the heavy rain, Coachman Zhao had to hurry to get supplies. He dropped Zhu Ping'an off in front of an inn, apologized briefly, and then drove off with the carriage.

Zhu Ping'an, carrying his bag, stood outside the inn and waved to the departing carriage, shouting his thanks.

"Eh, isn't that the top scholar, Zhu Ping'an? It's been months since I last saw you, how is it... how is it that you've gotten so... fat?"

One of the scholars, who had just returned from watching the "dragon spitting water" outside the city, heard Zhu Ping'an's voice and felt it was familiar. He looked up, and after staring for a few seconds, he recognized Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an certainly lived up to the nickname "the food bucket." After a few months, he had... gained weight...

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an looked over and saw someone from the group of scholars staring at him in surprise. The person looked somewhat familiar, but Zhu Ping'an couldn't place him. Perhaps it was someone from the poetry gathering in Xianxian or a guest from the Yingtian Mansion's Zui Jun Lou.

"I wouldn't dare to call myself the top scholar; it was just luck. Gained weight? Uh, my mother's cooking is too delicious, I can't resist..." Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in greeting from a distance and gave a silly smile.

"Zhu Xianbei, you're too modest," the other person replied, also cupping his hands.

After speaking, the person whispered something to the other scholars around him. After a moment, a few of them looked at Zhu Ping'an with disdain, perhaps with a hint of scorn.

"The wind is strong, and the rain is heavy. You should rest first, Xianbei. I'll come visit you another day," the person cupped his hands again, then left with his companions.