

## Rise 129

### Chapter 129: Thick Skin

Bidding farewell to his uncle, Zhu Ping'an continued to bury himself in his studies until the light grew dim. Only then did he stretch lazily and stop, looking out the window to see the western sky painted with a sunset glow as the sun set behind the hills.

Zhu Ping'an tidied up his desk, washed his face, and headed out for dinner.

He had grown tired of the inn's meals over the past few days, so he left the inn and wandered aimlessly along the street, searching for a small eatery that might catch his interest.

As a foodie, Zhu Ping'an would never compromise on his meals if circumstances allowed.

Yingtian was famous for its abundance of street food. Before walking too far, Zhu Ping'an spotted a restaurant that seemed decent, with a fair number of diners. The waiter recommended their signature dish—Chicken Broth Simmered Shredded Tofu—which Zhu Ping'an had been specifically seeking out. Naturally, he accepted the recommendation.

This dish, Chicken Broth Simmered Shredded Tofu, demands exceptional knife skills. It was once featured in *A Bite of China* as a specialty from Jiangsu Province. The ingredients are finely shredded with precision and then mixed with specially crafted seasonings. Just before serving, a touch of greens is added for garnish, creating an attractive and delicious dish that is hard to resist.

When the waiter finally brought Zhu Ping'an's portion, he couldn't wait to pick up a bite with his chopsticks. Blowing on it lightly, he placed it in his mouth. Instantly, the flavor struck his taste buds—an intricate fusion of spices and ingredients. The taste was more than a simple sum of its parts; it was a magical reaction that left him enchanted and unable to stop.

As he neared the end of his meal, a voice filled with surprise and a hint of drunkenness called out from outside the door.

"Brother Zhu, what a coincidence! Huh, it smells so good! If I hadn't stumbled upon you, you'd be enjoying this delicacy all to yourself again."

The voice was familiar. Zhu Ping'an looked up to see Fatty Xue Chi stumbling towards him. His round face was flushed red, likely from drinking.

Fatty Xue seemed to be dodging someone, glancing around as though trying to avoid confrontation.

It didn't take long to find out whom Fatty Xue was avoiding.

"Hey, you dead fatty, stop right there! Why are you running away?" A flamboyantly dressed woman, with a slightly worldly air, chased after him. She caught up with Xue Chi before he could enter the restaurant.

"Running? Who's running? I was just walking a bit faster, that's all," Fatty Xue, even after drinking, showcased his shameless resilience, completely unbothered.

"Fine, fine, my nemesis, have it your way. You didn't run, happy now? Last night, didn't you promise to take me into your household?" The vibrant woman blocked Fatty Xue's path, tugged on the gold chain around his neck, and asked with a fragrance that lingered like orchids.

Zhu Ping'an recognized the woman stopping Fatty Xue. She was the same striking lady Fatty had flirted with on the street a few days ago, only to be chased for two blocks by her lover. It seemed Fatty had finally won her over, possibly even scoring a home run.

Well, in both ancient and modern times, rich second-generation heirs always find it easy to court women. In ancient terms, Fatty Xue was the quintessential rich heir. Even if his bragging about frequenting every pleasure house in Bozhou was exaggerated, he was still experienced. With wealth and charm to spare, it was no surprise he succeeded.

However, it seemed Fatty had made promises to the woman, possibly to take her as a concubine. Judging by her confrontation, he had not fulfilled his promise, leading to this street showdown.

Some might wonder how, in such a conservative ancient society where a woman's reputation was paramount, this lady could openly stop a man on the street. After all, weren't women expected to keep a low profile, with modesty defined as beauty—smiling without showing teeth and walking with heads bowed? The reason is simple: this vibrant woman was a courtesan, part of the ancient entertainment scene. Concerns about reputation and propriety didn't matter to her, and she might even welcome such attention. Just as modern celebrities often thrive on scandals, courtesans of her time viewed such incidents as an opportunity to expand their influence.

"I've already gone too far by stealing someone else's food. Should I also take their pot?"

At that moment, the chubby man displayed an air of magnanimity and integrity, as if he possessed a heart pure as a child's, filled with virtue and noble character. His entire demeanor exuded high moral standards, and he genuinely seemed to be thinking on behalf of the beautiful woman's lover. His words brimmed with righteousness.

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but be in awe of the chubby man's shameless audacity.

However, as the saying goes, "Flies don't land on seamless eggs." While the chubby man was indeed shameless, the beautiful woman wasn't particularly deserving of sympathy either.

"Bah! You men are all no good!" The beautiful woman spat at the chubby man after hearing his words, slapped him hard across the face, and stormed off in a huff under the crowd's watchful eyes.

Clutching his face, which was stinging from the slap, the chubby man called out to the surrounding onlookers, "Alright, alright, the show's over. Everyone, disperse now."

His mental resilience was truly commendable. Just two seconds later, Xue Chi, the chubby man, strolled over to Zhu Ping'an with a red palm print on his face. Reeking of alcohol, he slurred his words as he called for the shopkeeper and ordered the same chicken broth with shredded tofu that Zhu Ping'an was having.

Many in the shop were watching the chubby man, most with disapproving eyes. Those glances extended to Zhu Ping'an as well, making him wish he could put a hundred meters between himself and this guy!

Although the shop was doing brisk business, there was no reason for the shopkeeper to personally serve dishes. But perhaps curious about the commotion earlier, the shopkeeper himself brought the chicken broth with shredded tofu to the chubby man's table.

The shopkeeper took the opportunity to glance at the chubby man a couple of times.

"Shopkeeper, tell me, how come I, a grown man, just can't control my lower half after having a few drinks?"

At this point, the chubby man lifted his hazy, drunken eyes and looked at the shopkeeper with a tone of regret, slurring his words as he spoke.

It felt exactly like a drunken man pouring his heart out to a close friend.

The shopkeeper smiled knowingly and comforted the chubby man, saying, "It's no big deal. You're a man, after all. Drinking, carousing, and playing around—this is all quite normal."

"Do you really think it's normal?" The chubby man hiccupped and asked again.

"Completely normal. Don't overthink it—this is Qinhuai River, after all." The shopkeeper patted the chubby man on the shoulder and gave him a knowing smile.

"Oh, then I'm relieved. By the way, shopkeeper, could you have someone clean up? I couldn't control myself and, uh, peed in your shop."

The shopkeeper: ...

Ten minutes later, on the way back to the inn, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but ask the chubby man with some concern, "Hey, Brother Xue, are you sure you're alright? I still have some medicine for injuries."

The chubby Xue Chi wobbled as he walked beside Zhu Ping'an, shaking his head repeatedly. "No problem, no problem. This is nothing."

In the last rays of the setting sun, faint footprints could be seen on Xue Chi's back. These weren't from the shopkeeper—they were from the other diners, who were utterly disgusted by Xue Chi's act of urinating in the shop and had kicked him out in frustration.

"By the way, Brother Zhu, I've thought it over. I think your medicine might still come in handy after all."

"Alright, come with me to get it later."