

Rise 175

Chapter 175: A Sudden Arrival

After coming of age, Zhu Ping'an's life remained largely unchanged. His family still called him "Zhi'er" affectionately, while the villagers either addressed him as "Young Master Zhu" or "Ping'an Lang." As for "Zi Hou," apart from his mentor and mentor's wife, no one else had used that name yet.

He continued his routine of practicing calligraphy and reading in the morning, studying the Eight-Legged Essay and policy discussions during the day, and copying books at night. Every three days or so, he would visit the wealthy Li family's residence to return and borrow books.

He spent his days quietly reading and reviewing, waiting for official news about the county-level imperial examination.

About a week after his coming-of-age ceremony, while there was still no news of the examination, an unexpected event occurred.

It was around dusk. Zhu Ping'an was sitting in the courtyard, using the last rays of the sunset to read the book he was copying. His mother, Chen, had just entered the kitchen to prepare dinner.

At that moment, there was a loud knock on the door, accompanied by a blood-curdling scream: "Brother Zhu! Brother Zhu! Open the door quickly!"

Zhu Ping'an, still reading, couldn't help but chuckle. Damn, why is this guy here?

That voice was far too familiar—besides Xue Chi, that chubby fellow, who else could it be? But wait, wasn't this guy supposed to be in Fengyang Prefecture? How did he end up here?

Chen peeked out from the kitchen and asked, "Zhi'er, sounds like someone is calling for you?"

"Mother, it's a friend I met in Ying Tian while taking the academy exam," Zhu Ping'an explained before getting up and walking toward the door. He reached out and opened it.

Standing outside was none other than the chubby Xue Chi, looking utterly disheveled, panting heavily, and glancing over his shoulder in fear.

"What kind of wind blew you all the way here?" Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but laugh at the sight of his bedraggled friend.

Xue Chi glanced behind him and, seeing that the stray dog chasing him was gone, finally let out a sigh of relief. He turned back to Zhu Ping'an, his round face full of bravado. "There isn't a wind strong enough to blow a man of my size!"

"Then why were you running?" Zhu Ping'an asked as he stepped aside to let him in.

Even at the mention of it, Xue Chi still looked shaken. Patting his chest, he said with lingering fear, "I've been afraid of dogs since I was a kid, and there are so many of them here. One of my family's guards told me that dogs are quite snobbish—if you act fierce, they'll be scared of you. He sounded so confident, so I thought it made sense. I got off the carriage and deliberately tested it on a village dog. Turns out, if I hadn't run fast enough, my parents would be mourning their son right now."

You idiot!

Zhu Ping'an was speechless at his friend's reckless behavior.

"Where's your guard?" Zhu Ping'an looked outside but saw no sign of him.

"I outran him, but don't worry, he'll find his way here soon," Xue Chi said casually as he entered, taking a good look around the courtyard. Then he gave a big thumbs-up and praised, "A farmhouse has a certain charm to it."

"It can't compare to your family's grand estate," Zhu Ping'an replied with a slight smile, unconcerned.

"Each has its own appeal," Xue Chi said as he rubbed his round face.

At that moment, Chen emerged from the kitchen, wearing an apron. Standing at the doorway, she looked at Xue Chi and asked,

"So, you're Zhi'er's friend?"

Upon seeing Chen, Xue Chi immediately ran over excitedly. Flashing a wide grin, he greeted her warmly, "Godmother! You sure have sharp eyes—you recognized me at a glance! I'm Xue Chi from Fengyang Prefecture. Just call me Xiao Xue!"

At this moment, the fat man was practically like a bulldog eager to please its master.

Godmother?

You're really taking advantage of the situation. That was fast.

"When we took the exam in Yingtian, we were as close as brothers. Brother Zhu's mother is naturally my mother as well. Your son, Xue Chi, greets his godmother." The fat man, Xue Chi, had a face full of sincerity as he dropped to his knees with a thud in front of Chen.

Chen was initially taken aback, but after a brief pause, she smiled and helped Fatty Xue up. "Child, the ground is cold. Quickly, get up."

"Sigh, this is why godmother is such a kind person." The fat man stood up and immediately started showering her with flattery.

Chen smiled until her eyes narrowed. The more she looked at the fat man, the more she liked him. His chubby appearance was rather endearing.

Soon, the guards from the fat man's household arrived, bringing a horse-drawn carriage.

The fat man went outside to help his guards unload the gifts from the carriage, carrying them one by one into Zhu Ping'an's house.

"What are you doing?" Zhu Ping'an stopped him.

"These are meeting gifts for my godmother and godfather. Don't stop me, or you'll be considered unfilial." The fat man spoke as he bustled about like a busy little bee, tirelessly moving gifts into Zhu Ping'an's home.

"Xiao Xue, if you keep this up, your godmother will be unhappy." Chen walked out from the kitchen, feigning displeasure.

"Godmother, please don't be upset. My parents asked me to bring these. They're not worth much, just a small token of appreciation. Please don't be angry." Fatty Xue explained as he carried the last few items into the house.

Looking around the courtyard, the items Fatty Xue and his guards had brought were nearly endless. There was everything—from silk fabrics and fine cloth to fruits, pastries, and personalized gifts for each member of the Zhu family. Altogether, the value was close to sixty or seventy taels of silver.

"You child..." Chen chided.

"These days, I'll be troubling you, godmother. I shamelessly came to freeload for a few days and taste your cooking."

The fat man grinned foolishly.

"Stay, stay as long as you like. Treat this as your own home." Chen waved her hand generously, approving his stay.

After his guards finished moving the gifts, the fat man instructed them to find a place to stay in town and wait for him until he was ready to return home.

When Zhu Ping'an's father returned, the fat man immediately called him "godfather" over and over again, leaving Zhu's father momentarily stunned. Chen had to explain the situation, after which Zhu's father rubbed his hands together and smiled, telling Fatty Xue not to be shy and to make himself at home.

Fortunately, the Zhu family had renovated their house recently, so there were enough rooms. They cleaned up a room for Fatty Xue, and Zhu's father and elder brother, Zhu Pingchuan, hurriedly made him a bed, while Chen provided a new quilt for him to rest.

That evening, Chen cooked several extra dishes and prepared fragrant, steamed rice, serving Fatty Xue a large bowl.

Fatty Xue did not disappoint. He devoured his food with gusto, and despite being used to feasting on rich meats, he found the simple, homemade dishes of a farming household absolutely delicious. He especially loved Chen's pickled cucumbers, which paired perfectly with rice porridge—truly a delicacy.

By the end of the meal, the fat man was extremely envious that Zhu Ping'an got to eat such delicious food every day.

"Zhi'er, you should learn from Xiao Xue and eat more."

Watching Fatty Xue's hearty appetite, Chen grew increasingly pleased. Now that was what eating should look like! She even used him as an example to educate Zhu Ping'an. Noticing that her youngest son had lost

weight from too much studying lately, she picked up two pieces of meat—one for Fatty Xue and one for Zhu Ping'an.