

Rise 184

Chapter 184: One is Yan, the other is Zhang

The drizzle from last night had already stopped by the time Zhu Ping'an finished writing the last part of his second proposal on resisting the Japanese pirates.

In the early morning, after washing up, Zhu Ping'an pushed open the window and was instantly greeted by a breath of fresh air. As expected, the rain had washed away all the dust floating in the sky, making the air quality thousands of times better than the smog-filled modern cities.

Zhu Ping'an took a calligraphy practice sheet and a handwritten book from his desk, placing them in his satchel. Then, he took out the fried flatbread that his mother, Chen, had made before her departure. In just over two days, the flatbread had already developed a faint sour smell. However, remembering his mother's figure staying up late to make them, he still wrapped the last two pieces along with some pickled vegetables in paper, tucked them under his black wooden board, and brought them downstairs.

He ordered a bowl of porridge in the main hall and ate every bite along with the flatbread and pickled vegetables.

After breakfast, Zhu Ping'an slung his satchel over his shoulder, tucked the black wooden board under his arm, and, as usual, leisurely made his way to the banks of the Qinhuai River.

Due to the heavy rain in the past few days, the water level of the Qinhuai River had risen significantly, submerging one step of the stone staircase. Zhu Ping'an took out a bamboo tube from his bag, scooped up some river water, and then walked towards the woods where he usually practiced calligraphy and read.

On the opposite bank of the Qinhuai River, a young girl with an elaborate hanging-horse bun and dressed in exceptionally luxurious clothing opened her window after waking up. Suddenly, she became excited and reached out her delicate hand to tug at the seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl who was beside her doing her makeup. Pointing to the opposite bank of the Qinhuai River, she said with some excitement, "Sister, do you see that figure? Isn't that our benefactor?"

The girl who was putting on makeup paused, put down the rouge in her hand, and quickly looked out the window. However, all she could see were the passing painted boats—there was no sign of any particular person.

"Dear sister, stop trying to fool me. We've mistaken others twice before. A gentleman as gentle and refined as jade is not someone we can dream about," the girl doing her makeup said with some disappointment, turning away from the window and trying to console her younger sister.

"But, but, sister, I really think I saw him just now," the girl with the hanging-horse bun pouted.

"You said the same thing the last two times..." the older girl chided playfully, then pulled her younger sister to sit in front of the dressing table and continued doing her hair.

Fallen leaves covered the entire forest floor, making the ground invisible. Even the stone used for calligraphy practice was buried under a thick layer of leaves. However, the air in the woods was excellent—fresh, mixed with the fragrance of the soil, making one feel invigorated.

Zhu Ping'an picked up a branch and swept the stone clean. He placed the black wooden board on it and cushioned a thick piece of coarse cloth on a nearby small stone before sitting down to practice his calligraphy.

By now, Zhu Ping'an's handwriting had developed its own unique style—if placed in a modern calligraphy competition, it would surely win first place.

Gradually, the morning light appeared in the east, and the sun began to rise.

Sunlight filtered through the gaps in the trees, casting a faint golden halo around Zhu Ping'an as he bent over practicing his calligraphy.

"Good writing, good writing!"

A sudden voice startled Zhu Ping'an, making him nearly jump. Looking up, he saw an elderly man dressed as a Taoist standing beside him, full of praise for the calligraphy on his black wooden board.

Though the old man's hair was completely white, his face was ruddy, and he had an otherworldly demeanor. He wore a purple Taoist headscarf and an eight-trigram robe, with his sleeves fluttering in the gentle breeze... His entire presence exuded the aura of an old charlatan.

Damn, when did this old fraudster get here?

Zhu Ping'an was so startled by the sudden outburst that he nearly threw his brush. After regaining his composure, he scrutinized the Taoist from head to toe and slightly curled his lips—his attire was quite convincing.

"Hiss..." The Taoist let out a strange sound the moment Zhu Ping'an looked up.

Are you a Taoist or a snake spirit? Hissing like that? Bad review!

Zhu Ping'an mocked him in his heart while observing the Taoist's astonished expression. He couldn't help but think: The next thing this Taoist says won't be, "Young man, I see that your face is extraordinary, with a full and prominent forehead—you must be no ordinary person," will it?

The next second, the Taoist spoke, "Young master, I see that your face is quite extraordinary..."

As expected. How has this routine remained unchanged for hundreds of years?

Zhu Ping'an couldn't hold back a laugh. "Taoist priest, how much does a fortune-telling session cost? I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you—I'm quite poor, with empty sleeves and no money to pay for a reading."

"This poor Taoist only asks for fate, not money."

The old Taoist looked at Zhu Ping'an and shook his head, his expression inscrutable. He stroked his long beard, exuding an aura of mysticism to the fullest.

"This young master seems to not believe my words?" the old Taoist asked faintly.

Zhu Ping'an stood up, cupped his hands, and sincerely nodded, "To be honest with you, Taoist, I do not believe in such things. I only have a few copper coins with me, consider it a small token for you to have breakfast. I must continue my studies and prepare for my exams, so I apologize for my rudeness."

As he spoke, Zhu Ping'an took out a dozen copper coins from his school bag and handed them to the old Taoist, signaling him to take the money for breakfast and to not disturb his reading.

However, what happened next was beyond Zhu Ping'an's expectations. This old Taoist had quite the professional integrity—he actually shook his head and refused, not even sparing a glance at the copper coins. Instead, he muttered:

"The head is the supreme ruler of the yang energies, the face is the foundation of the five elements, housing the spirit of a hundred veins and serving as the divine passage to the five organs. It represents the manifestation of the three talents and determines the fortune of one's life. This young man's facial features are extraordinary. In my life, I have only seen such a face on two others."

As he spoke, the old Taoist even raised two fingers with an air of mystery.

Zhu Ping'an had no interest in who those two people were; he only wanted to get rid of this old mystic so he could return to his studies.

"Taoist, it would be best if you did not reveal the secrets of fate."

Under normal circumstances, Zhu Ping'an might have asked who the two people were, but right now, all he cared about was reading more, so he didn't follow the usual script.

Even after hearing this, the old Taoist remained as composed and enigmatic as ever, showing no sign of awkwardness. "It doesn't matter. It is fine if young master does not believe me. To be honest, even I find it hard to believe—your features are even more remarkable than those two I have seen before."

Is this old Taoist trying to latch onto me?

Zhu Ping'an glanced at the book he was copying, feeling speechless.

The old Taoist also noticed the book in Zhu Ping'an's hand, but he simply smiled and shook his head, speaking with the same cryptic tone.

"This book is not worthy of your face."

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an was even more dumbfounded. The book he was copying was none other than Zhu Xi's edition of the Four Books and Five Classics. As a poor scholar, he relied on this to pass the imperial examination. Just moments ago, the old Taoist claimed his features were extraordinary—if not through the imperial exam, then how else was he supposed to stand out? This was completely contradictory...

Wait a minute, is this old Taoist trying to trick me into buying books?

Just as this thought crossed Zhu Ping'an's mind, he saw the old Taoist pull out two thick, worn-out books from who-knows-where and mysteriously hand them over to him.

So that really was his intention! Zhu Ping'an was at a loss for words.

"These two books are more fitting for your face," the old Taoist said, placing them in Zhu Ping'an's hands.

Forcing a sale?

But what happened next once again defied Zhu Ping'an's expectations. Before he could say anything, the old Taoist placed the books in his hands and then floated away without another word.

"The two I have seen—one bore the surname Yan, the other Zhang... The mountain already has a tiger, and now a young tiger enters the forest. Young master, take care of yourself."