

Rise 188

Chapter 188: I'm Not a Tiger

The fat man was completely bewildered, utterly confused, and unable to make sense of the situation. He hurried after Zhu Ping'an upstairs.

Once they reached the upper floor, where there was no one else around, and after the fat man persistently questioned him, Zhu Ping'an finally responded calmly, "Prepare gold and silver and send it to his house. That will ensure your path in the imperial examination remains smooth."

There had been too many people downstairs, making it inconvenient to speak openly. But now, with only the two of them present and speaking in low voices, there was no need to worry about eavesdroppers, so Zhu Ping'an stated it plainly.

"Huh?"

The fat man was so shocked by Zhu Ping'an's revelation that his mouth gaped wide enough to swallow a fist. What was going on? Just moments ago, he hadn't even known that their provincial education officer had been replaced by Lord Zhao. Now, having only just heard Lord Zhao's name, he was already suggesting bribery? Was he just making things up and talking big?

"This morning, I was outside reading when I encountered Lord Zhao's coachman. He was arrogant and nearly ran into me," Zhu Ping'an sat at the table, poured himself a cup of tea, took a sip, and spoke slowly.

"What does that have to do with your suggestion?!" The fat man was exasperated.

"Because the carriage almost hit me, I got a good look at it. Lord Zhao's carriage is no ordinary one—it's made of catalpa wood, blended with spices. The curtain fabric is silk with gold embroidery, and the hanging ornaments are all valuable..." Zhu Ping'an said with a faint smirk.

In truth, it didn't really matter whether the Lord Zhao he had encountered that morning was the same Zhao Wenhua they were talking about. This was merely an excuse to convince the fat man. After all, historically, Zhao Wenhua was infamous for his greed. He was the type who would even exploit the emperor's wealth without hesitation. It was unthinkable that he wouldn't take bribes in the imperial examination. If there were going to be backdoor deals, better that the fat man benefit than someone else.

Hearing this, the fat man's eyes lit up. "You mean to say..."

"What did I say? I didn't say anything at all." Zhu Ping'an shrugged, maintaining a perfectly innocent expression.

"Hahaha, I get it, I get it! Many thanks, Brother Zhu..." The fat man clasped his pudgy hands together repeatedly in gratitude.

"You might be able to do this for the provincial exam, but it won't work for the imperial examination. In the time before the imperial exam, you should focus on your studies," Zhu Ping'an said seriously after taking another sip of tea.

The provincial exam was conducted by the education officer, who had full control over selecting candidates for the imperial examination. However, the imperial exam was different—it was overseen by imperial-appointed Hanlin scholars and cabinet academicians who served as chief and deputy examiners. There was almost no room for corruption.

"Rest assured, Brother Zhu! I will definitely study diligently, day and night..." The fat man went on and on with empty promises.

"Suit yourself. I have books to read," Zhu Ping'an placed his teacup on the table and said coolly.

"All right, all right, I'll go back and prepare properly." The fat man tactfully took his leave, eager to make arrangements for the bribery. There wasn't much time left before the exam. The available slots were already limited, and even fewer were set aside for those who secured their place through underhanded means. He had to act fast before someone else beat him to it.

That afternoon, Zhu Ping'an remained in his room, practicing the eight-legged essay and policy argumentation. He wrote an essay from scratch, then recalled and transcribed similar past top-scoring essays from memory, comparing them to identify shortcomings. He then refined and improved his work accordingly. Finally, he burned those essays. These top-scoring essays had yet to appear in this era, and they had no place in this dynasty. Zhu Ping'an had no intention of leaving behind any incriminating evidence. Caution was the key to survival in this time.

Early the next morning, the moon could still be seen hanging in the sky as he walked outside. The moon, so weak, so pale, so powerless, resembled the face of someone just recovering from a serious illness. It glowed with a faint white light, delicate and subtle, reminiscent of the Song lyrics penned by Li Qingzhao.

Under the cool moonlight, Zhu Ping'an carried a black wooden board under his arm, slung his bookbag over his shoulder, and leisurely walked from the inn toward the forest where he usually practiced his calligraphy.

While Zhu Ping'an was still by the Qinhuai River, filling a bamboo tube with water, a window in a room across the river was gently pushed open. A girl of about seventeen or eighteen peeked through the gap. In the distance, she could vaguely make out the figure of a scholar standing on the riverbank.

After taking a quick look, the girl quietly shut the window, tiptoed to her dressing table, and quickly began touching up her makeup. She darkened her brows, lined her eyes, and carefully curled her eyelashes with a small clamp. She used an expensive rouge, one she usually hesitated to use—a box costing over ten taels of silver. Finally, she took a strip of red paper, placed it between her lips, and lightly pressed down, tinting the corners of her mouth a soft red.

In the mirror, a bashful yet radiant young girl smiled sweetly.

Once she was ready, she draped herself in a sheer gauzy robe and tiptoed toward the door. However, as she opened it, the slight sound startled another girl lying on the bed.

"Big sister, where are you going?"

The girl on the bed, her hair styled in a drooping horse-tail bun, rubbed her sleepy eyes and drowsily looked at the girl by the door, half-awake and half-asleep.

"Sister... I'm just stepping out for a moment. You can go back to sleep—we can sleep in today," the girl at the door coaxed softly.

"Oh," the younger girl mumbled before rolling over and sinking back into sleep. Last night, her sister had talked with her for a long time, and they had gone to bed very late. She was still extremely drowsy.

Seeing that her sister had fallen back asleep, the girl at the door let out a sigh of relief, gently shut the door, and carefully made her way downstairs. She quietly crossed the bridge and headed toward the opposite side of the Qinhuai River.

Meanwhile, in the forest, Zhu Ping'an was fully engrossed in his calligraphy practice, completely unaware that a girl draped in sheer gauze was approaching.

"Young Master Zhou?"

Just as Zhu Ping'an was deep in concentration, a delicate, inquisitive voice suddenly rang out, startling him. He looked up—and was even more shocked. A ghost in white?!

"It really is my benefactor! I thought I might be mistaken," the girl, whom Zhu Ping'an had mistaken for a ghost, covered her lips with a slender jade-like hand and let out a sweet giggle. Her large, watery eyes brimmed with joy.

"You are...?" Zhu Ping'an squinted slightly.

"You truly are a forgetful nobleman, Young Master Zhou. You once wrote a poem about a white fox for my sister and me. Such talent! Thanks to your kindness, we won third place in the courtesan contest. Our lives have been much better since then," the seventeen- or eighteen-year-old girl said as she slowly walked toward Zhu Ping'an.

Ah, so it was them. Zhu Ping'an finally recalled the incident.

"Oh dear, Young Master, you're sweating!"

The girl suddenly gasped as she reached his side, then quickly pulled a delicately scented handkerchief from her sleeve and moved to wipe his face.

Sweating?

What a joke! It was still chilly in the early morning—how could he possibly be sweating?

And seriously, that handkerchief's fragrance was way too overpowering! Instinctively, Zhu Ping'an turned his head away, dodging the girl's soft, slender hand.

Her face flushed a deep shade of red, her large, watery eyes blinking at him in mock indignation. "Why are you avoiding me, benefactor? I'm not a tiger—I won't eat you."

Are you kidding me? Zhu Ping'an looked at the girl's shy yet flirtatious expression and was momentarily speechless.

Come on! I'm still just a kid!