

Rise 207

Chapter 207: The Stench of Wine and Meat Behind Vermilion Gates

Since there aren't many things to pack, Zhu Ping'an quickly finished organizing and packing his belongings. It was still early, so he sat at his desk, practicing calligraphy while continuing to write *The Legend of Heaven Slaying and Earth Subduing*—it would be useful to have more written when borrowing books back home.

Zhu Ping'an treated the writing as calligraphy practice and continued until noon before putting down his brush. Looking outside the window, he saw that it had started snowing again—a vast expanse of pure white drifting through the air.

Perhaps it was the sight of the snowfall that piqued his interest, or maybe it was the sense of leisure that came with passing the imperial exam. Zhu Ping'an put away his ink, brushes, and paper, donned a rabbit-fur coat, and prepared to go downstairs for a stroll through the snow-covered city of Nanjing while grabbing lunch along the way.

In the main hall, many scholars were gathered around the newly successful examinee, Zhu Shiming. Two tables were filled with large plates of fish and meat, and beside them, two warming stoves held pots of fragrant wine that exuded an intoxicating aroma.

"Brother Zhu, come and drink with us!" Zhu Shiming, upon seeing Zhu Ping'an descending the stairs, stood up and invited him from afar.

"Two successful scholars at one table—this will be a story worth telling in the future!" The others also stood up and extended their invitations, their attitudes toward Zhu Ping'an having changed since the dramatic events of the morning.

After all, a person favored by high-ranking officials was not someone to be taken lightly.

Zhu Ping'an clasped his hands in thanks but politely declined, saying he had other matters to attend to. Then, he stepped out of the inn and wandered aimlessly through the streets of Yingtian. He had been so focused on preparing for the imperial exams that he had never taken the time to properly explore this opulent city, steeped in the grandeur of six dynasties. Today, with time on his hands, he decided to take a good look around.

Outside, the streets were blanketed in a layer of silver-white snow. In this snow-laden capital, the restaurants and tea houses lining the streets were packed with customers. The rich aromas of food and wine filled the air, and wealthy patrons could be seen feasting at tables, their laughter echoing through the cold streets. In the more upscale establishments, even dancing courtesans could be spotted performing for the guests.

After strolling along the banks of the Qinhuai River for a while, Zhu Ping'an changed direction and walked down a street he had never explored before.

This street was just as bustling as the areas along the Qinhuai River, if not more so. Compared to the politically sensitive areas near the Confucius Temple, this street had looser regulations, allowing merchants and vendors to conduct business more freely. The atmosphere was livelier, with street hawkers actively engaging with customers and children running around, playing and chasing one another—filling the air with a sense of everyday life.

The lively food stalls were particularly inviting, and Zhu Ping'an decided to buy a serving of guotie (pan-fried dumplings), wrapped in thick paper. He ate as he walked, taking in the snowy scenery of Yingtian.

The dumplings were crispy on the outside, juicy on the inside, and full of rich aroma.

Eating hot, freshly fried dumplings in the midst of a snowy day was an especially satisfying experience.

Just as Zhu Ping'an was leisurely strolling and enjoying his food, a loud gulping sound suddenly caught his attention.

He stopped in his tracks and turned toward the sound. At the entrance of a nearby alley, two children—no more than five or six years old—were huddled against the wall, looking at him with timid yet yearning eyes. They wore tattered shoes, too large for their feet, with their toes exposed to the bitter cold. Their clothes were wrinkled and patched with crude stitches.

It was difficult to tell their genders. They were both thin, but their eyes were large and bright, staring intently at the dumplings in Zhu Ping'an's hands.

The sight stunned Zhu Ping'an.

Since arriving in the Ming Dynasty, he had lived in a poor mountain village, yet most families could still get by. His focus had been on studying for the imperial exams, and he had nearly forgotten that such scenes of suffering existed.

"Here, take these. Big brother will treat you," Zhu Ping'an said, squatting down and offering the dumplings to the children.

The two children exchanged nervous glances, hesitant to move.

"I'm not a bad person. Go on, take them," Zhu Ping'an said gently, smiling reassuringly as he extended the dumplings toward the older-looking child.

In the end, the two children couldn't resist the temptation of the steaming hot dumplings. The older child cautiously reached out and took them. Realizing that Zhu Ping'an was genuinely giving them food, their big eyes lit up with joy.

"Let's give them to mother."

The two children took the potstickers that Zhu Ping'an gave them. After swallowing their saliva a couple more times, they excitedly determined the ownership of the potstickers without any dispute.

"Big brother, come to my house for some water!"

Because of a portion of potstickers, the two children completely categorized Zhu Ping'an as a good person. Overjoyed, they eagerly invited him to their home for water. Their eyes sparkled with anticipation, as if afraid he would refuse.

Following the two children into an alley, Zhu Ping'an found himself in a deep and winding passage, as if it connected two different worlds.

The alley twisted and turned strangely. Eventually, the children led Zhu Ping'an into another alley. At the entrance hung a weathered sign with the three characters "Yang Ji Yuan" (Charitable Relief House). Inside the alley, there was a large area filled with simple, crude housing—low and narrow, barely able to provide shelter from the wind and snow. The pathways were also dirty and chaotic.

The children led Zhu Ping'an into a cramped and narrow courtyard. Inside, a thin and sickly woman was washing clothes, her body covered in wind and snow. Her fingers were cracked and swollen from the cold.

"Da Wu, Wu, you're back. Cough, cough. Wait until I finish washing these clothes, and then I'll boil some water for you to drink. When your father returns tonight, we'll have food to eat."

The woman's voice was weak, clearly suffering from illness.

"Mother, eat this." The older child, Da Yi, eagerly presented the wrapped potstickers like a treasure, holding one up to his mother's mouth.

"Da Wu, did you steal this from someone?! Cough, cough, cough..." Instead of being pleased, the woman became furious, coughing violently.

"No, Mother, this big brother gave it to us," the child said, feeling wronged.

Only then did the woman notice Zhu Ping'an standing in the courtyard. Warily, she pulled the two children into her arms. Taking the potstickers from Da Yi's hands, she placed them on a wooden board beside her and then quickly led the children inside.

"Young master, please take your things and leave. My husband is not home. We do not sell our children, we sell nothing..."

The woman's weak, sickly voice came from inside the room.

"Mother, big brother is not a bad person," the two children protested, only to be silenced by their mother.

Zhu Ping'an glanced at himself and suddenly understood—the divide between men and women...

Looking at the tightly shut door, Zhu Ping'an knew it was best to leave. Any more words would be unnecessary, and staying any longer would only make things worse.

After a moment of thought, he took out all the silver coins he carried, placed them beside the potstickers, gave a slight bow, and spoke a single phrase before departing.

"Sorry for the disturbance."

With that, Zhu Ping'an left the courtyard and continued walking deeper into the alley.

Here, in this alley, Zhu Ping'an personally witnessed the gaping wounds beneath the dazzling exterior of the Ming Empire...

"The stench of meat and wine behind red gates, while bones of the frozen poor lie in the streets."

For some, the heavy snowfall in Yingtian was not a beautiful sight but a disaster. While wealthy families and officials—himself included—enjoyed feasts and admired the snow, the poor were dying of hunger and cold on the streets. Some couldn't even afford medical treatment. The contrast was chilling.

As he spoke with an elderly man with graying hair at the alley entrance, Zhu Ping'an came to understand why these people had fallen into such dire straits, despite the Ming Dynasty's supposedly low taxes. They had no

land. Why? Because of land annexation and the burden of forced labor. While agricultural taxes were low, corvée labor was heavy.

For various reasons, these people had lost their land. And for a farmer, no land meant no income. Yet, even without income, one still had to eat. So they began selling off their possessions. Eventually, they became vagrants. When even eating tree bark and leaves could no longer stave off hunger, they were left with no choice but to sell their wives and children...

This winter was particularly harsh for them. They lacked food, warm clothing, and money for medical care...

The young scholar of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Ping'an, walked through the alley with heavy footsteps. He saw the starving refugees barely clinging to life, struggling to survive in these desolate streets. He saw their desperate and helpless eyes.

By the Qinhuai River, the rich drank wine and admired the snow, while in the alleys, the poor froze and starved.

A certain young man walked out of the alley with heavy steps—his gaze resolute.