

Rise 215

Chapter 215: Returning Home

The wind has settled, yet the snow still falls. At dusk, the young crows cry.

At this moment, the sun had already tilted westward. Zhu's father hurried home on the last ox cart of the day, enjoying the fragrant dinner prepared by Chen.

Not long after, on the road from Kaoshan Town to Xiahe Village, the figure of a young man appeared. He carried a large backpack on his back, walking cheerfully along the path, unfazed by the drifting snow, singing as he went.

"Listen to your mother, don't let her get hurt. You need to grow up fast so you can protect her. Beautiful white hair, happiness always sprouts. The angel's magic is warm and kind..."

Zhu Ping'an walked quickly, eager to see the surprised expression on his mother Chen's face when she saw him.

Creak, creak...

The sound of his steps crunching through the snow echoed along the road.

"Is that Young Master Zhu ahead?"

Just as Zhu Ping'an was singing and walking along the snow-covered path, a voice called out from behind. He turned to see a carriage approaching from the distance. It soon came to a steady stop not far from him.

The driver looked somewhat familiar—a middle-aged man, whom Zhu Ping'an seemed to have seen before at Master Li's residence.

"It really is Young Master Zhu! What a coincidence! I handle the kitchen purchases for the Li family. I saw you when you borrowed books before. This afternoon, I was sent by Miss to run some errands in town, but I got delayed. I never expected to run into you on my way back! You just got home, right? I'm really lucky to be the first to see you! Congratulations on passing the imperial examination as a juren! You've really brought honor to our town!"

The middle-aged man was quite talkative, speaking nonstop before warmly offering Zhu Ping'an a ride.

Since he could sit in the carriage and avoid getting covered in snow, Zhu Ping'an naturally cupped his hands in thanks and accepted the offer.

Inside the carriage, there were various vegetables and meats the man had purchased, but there was still enough space for Zhu Ping'an to sit comfortably, along with his luggage.

"I'm not in a rush—the goods aren't needed until tomorrow. Besides, if you're going to help someone, you might as well help all the way. It's like sending a Buddha to the West. And Young Master Zhu is now a juren! I'm the one benefiting from your success!"

Upon reaching Shanghe Village, the driver insisted on taking Zhu Ping'an all the way to Xiahe Village, showing great enthusiasm.

At this moment, Zhu Ping'an's home was brightly lit. Two large red lanterns had been newly hung at the entrance. Amidst the falling snow, the red lanterns glowed warmly. These must have been put up recently—when he left home, there hadn't been any red lanterns.

"Mother, it's enough to hang the lanterns. We already light two candles every night."

At the dinner table, Zhu Pingchuan thought about the daily use of two candles and couldn't help but feel distressed. Lighting candles during holidays was one thing, but this wasn't a festival.

Chen was displeased upon hearing this. "What do you know? If Zhi'er comes home at night, he'll be able to see our house and won't go to the wrong door."

"How would Zhi come home so late? He always comes back during the day. And he's not a child—how would he go to the wrong house?"

Zhu Pingchuan muttered under his breath, but after receiving a sharp glare from Chen, he fell silent.

"Did you hear something outside?"

As they ate, Chen suddenly put down her chopsticks and perked up her ears.

"Mother, you must have misheard again. I already went out to check earlier," Zhu Pingchuan whispered.

Before Chen could say anything, Zhu's father, who had been quietly eating, suddenly put down his chopsticks, looked up toward the door, and said, "There really is a noise. It sounds like a carriage has stopped at our gate."

As someone who often drove carts, Zhu's father was very sensitive to the sound of vehicles. He could easily distinguish between an ox cart and a horse-drawn carriage.

Hearing this, Chen immediately put down her chopsticks and got up to go outside. She had a strong feeling these past few days that Zhu Ping'an was coming home. Now that Zhu's father had confirmed that a carriage had stopped at their door, she couldn't wait any longer. Even if it meant getting it wrong a few times, she wouldn't miss a single chance.

Outside the door, Zhu Ping'an took his luggage down from the carriage and cupped his hands in gratitude toward the Li family's coachman. Being able to arrive home just as night was falling was thanks to the coachman's generous offer to give him a ride.

Just as Zhu Ping'an was expressing his gratitude, the door of the Zhu family's house swung open, and his mother, Chen, stepped out. With just one glance, she recognized Zhu Ping'an, who was standing at the door, bent slightly forward while cupping his hands in thanks.

"Zhi'er!"

Chen covered her mouth in surprise and joy, but her excitement still slipped into her voice.

"Hehe, Mother, I'm back." Zhu Ping'an immediately recognized the joy in her tone. After finishing his thanks, he turned around, scratching his head with a silly grin as he looked at her.

He had originally planned to surprise his mother, but he hadn't expected her to step outside so quickly. Still, seeing her delighted expression, he felt that making the overnight journey was well worth it.

"Why did you travel through the night, silly child? It's so unsafe! Wouldn't it have been better to come home in the morning?" After the initial joy, Chen pretended to scold him for his reckless journey.

Zhu Ping'an kept his usual silly grin, which made Chen tap his forehead in exasperation.

"And who is this?"

Only then did Chen notice the coachman standing to the side and asked in confusion.

"Madam, I am in charge of purchasing ingredients for the Li family's kitchen in Shanghe Village. This afternoon, my lady sent me to town for supplies, but I was delayed. On my way back, I happened to come across Young Master Zhu. He has brought great honor to our town—he's the youngest scholar in the history of our county! It was my privilege to give him a ride." The coachman was talkative, speaking a little incoherently, but he managed to get his point across.

The mention of the Li family in Shanghe Village immediately caught Chen's attention. Then, upon hearing that the coachman had been running an errand for Miss Li and happened to pick up Zhu Ping'an on the way, she couldn't help but think of Li Shu.

She felt this was fate—without this chance encounter, Zhu Ping'an might have had to trek through the snowy night. But thanks to Li Shu, he made it home early, safe and sound. Even an unintentional action of hers had protected him... What a lucky wife she would be...

"Come inside and have some hot soup to warm up," Chen warmly invited the coachman.

"Yes, Brother Wang, don't be shy," Zhu Ping'an also extended an invitation.

"No, thank you, Madam, Young Master Zhu. I still need to report back," the coachman shook his head and politely declined, insisting on returning to the Li family.

"We've already prepared dinner. Have some soup before you go—it won't take long. My Zhi'er is lucky you were there; otherwise, he would have suffered on the road," Chen invited once again.

"No, Madam, our young lady has set rules for the household. I must return immediately. Giving Young Master Zhu a ride was a blessing for us. Madam, Young Master Zhu, I'll take my leave."

The coachman still declined, climbed onto his carriage, and departed.

Watching the carriage disappear into the distance, Chen became even more pleased with Miss Li Shu. From what the coachman had said, she had already started managing the household. Beautiful, filial, and capable—she was like a daughter-in-law sent from the heavens!

A certain idea had already taken firm root in Chen's heart.

At that moment, Zhu's father and Zhu Pingchuan also walked out of the house. They had heard voices outside and, seeing that Chen hadn't returned, hurried out to see what was happening.

And then, they saw Zhu Ping'an.

"You're back." Zhu's father spoke calmly, but he swiftly reached out to take the luggage off Zhu Ping'an's back. This action made Chen very satisfied.

"Zhi'er, you're back!" Zhu Pingchuan's voice was filled with joy.

Chen cast a sidelong glance at him and said with a huff, "Hmph! Who was it just now that said Zhi'er couldn't possibly return at night and even complained that I was wasting candles?"

"Mother..." Zhu Pingchuan stretched out his voice in protest.

"Father, Brother, I'm back," Zhu Ping'an responded with a silly grin.