

## Rise 243

### Chapter 243: The Peacock Terrace

The next morning, the wind and snow continued.

Zhu Ping'an got up early and practiced calligraphy with a suspended wrist on a black wooden board laid out on the window-side table. After the other guests in the inn gradually got up, Zhu Ping'an packed away the board, placed the brush and other tools into his satchel one by one, tidied up his bedding and belongings, and brought two pieces of oil cake made by Madam Chen downstairs.

In the main hall of the inn, Zhu Ping'an ordered a bowl of mutton soup just like the previous night, soaking the oil cake in it and finishing his meal.

"Thank you for your service. May I ask which direction the official road heading north is?"

After breakfast, Zhu Ping'an paid the bill and cupped his hands to politely ask the innkeeper for directions.

"No trouble at all. There are two official roads heading north from this town. May I ask where the guest is headed?" the innkeeper responded warmly.

"To the capital," Zhu Ping'an replied.

"In that case, take this direction. After passing the Peacock Terrace, there is an official road that leads directly to Luzhou Fu. From there, there are many routes to the capital," the innkeeper led Zhu Ping'an to the door and pointed out the direction while explaining.

Luzhou Fu, which is modern-day Hefei, has been a strategic military location since ancient times. During the Three Kingdoms period, the states of Cao Wei and Eastern Wu fought fiercely there for decades. In the Song Dynasty, it was called Luzhou. During the Southern Song period, Hefei was on the front line against the Jin invaders. Passing through Hefei on the way to the capital was not a bad idea; it would be a good opportunity to see what this contested military site looked like in ancient times.

"Many thanks," Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in gratitude to the innkeeper.

After confirming the route, Zhu Ping'an informed a servant of the inn to check him out. Once his things were packed, the inn servant helped carry them to the backyard and loaded them onto his well-fed, Shamat black horse. Before mounting, Zhu Ping'an pulled a long-collared rabbit fur cloak from his bundle and put it on.

This cloak was specially made by his mother, Madam Chen, to keep him warm and protected from the wind on the road. The rabbit fur came from rabbits trapped and skinned by his elder brother, Zhu Pingchuan, in the mountains.

"There's snow today, guest. Why not stay another day and wait for it to stop?" the innkeeper said kindly at the door.

"Thank you, but snowy days aren't too cold—just right for making good progress," Zhu Ping'an mounted his horse, cupped his hands slightly in thanks to the innkeeper, and then urged the horse forward along the route indicated.

The small town wasn't large; after riding for a little more than ten minutes, he saw the Peacock Terrace that the innkeeper had mentioned.

He had assumed the so-called Peacock Terrace was just a name for a small mound, but to his surprise, the sight before him was grand and imposing. The Peacock Terrace was shaped like the character "台" occupying more than 100 square meters, built in two levels. The upper level was a spacious open platform with a corridor-style roof, flying eaves and upturned corners. Each level featured dougong brackets, carved beams, and painted rafters—majestic and awe-inspiring.

How could such a small town have such a structure? Curious, Zhu Ping'an rode closer.

"The peacock flies southeast, pausing every five li..."

Engraved on the stone wall and display windows in the long corridor before the Peacock Terrace was none other than the piece 'The Peacock Flies Southeast'. The calligraphy was refined and carried a deep, mournful emotion.

Ah, now he remembered.

This small town in Huaining County—the Peacock Terrace. That's right. This was the birthplace of The Peacock Flies Southeast, known together with the Northern Dynasty's Ballad of Mulan as the "twin jewels of the Yuefu poems." It was also the burial site of Jiao Zhongqing and Liu Lanzhi.

He had been in Huaining County for quite a while and had completely forgotten about this place. Fortunately, he passed through here on his way to take the imperial exams. Truly, reading ten thousand books isn't as good as traveling ten thousand miles.

During the Jian'an period of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the talented and beautiful Liu Lanzhi and the small official from Lujiang, Jiao Zhongqing, sincerely loved each other. However, Jiao Zhongqing's mother, due to various reasons, made life difficult for Liu Lanzhi. Determined, Lanzhi chose to return to her family, and Zhongqing pleaded with his mother to no avail. The couple had no choice but to part ways, swearing to the heavens not to betray each other.

Lanzhi returned to her parental home, and suitors came one after another, first a county magistrate seeking to marry her son, and then a governor's assistant as a matchmaker. Because of her agreement with Zhongqing, Lanzhi firmly refused. However, her brother spoke harshly to her, and Lanzhi reluctantly consented to the governor's family marriage proposal. When Zhongqing heard of this, he rushed to her, and the couple promised each other, "In heaven, we wish to be winged birds together, on earth, we wish to be entwined branches." On the day of Lanzhi's wedding, Liu and Jiao both met their end, entering the yellow springs together, becoming a timeless tragic tale.

If it were up to me, such a tragedy would never have happened.

After paying tribute to the site at the Peacock Terrace for a long time, Zhu Ping'an sighed and then urged his horse to leave the platform, heading north along the official road.

The official road after snow is much easier to travel on than one after rain. The Shamat black horse seemed to disregard the cold wind, lifting its head proudly and galloping happily forward in the snowstorm, perhaps thinking that the official road was easier than mountain paths.

As Zhu Ping'an traveled north along the official road, he could occasionally see the silhouettes of villages on both sides, unlike the previous day when he walked for half a day without seeing a single house.

Around midday, Zhu Ping'an left the official road and went to a small village near the road.

The north wind was fierce, blowing the loose snow from the fields into the village, and then sweeping it out again along the narrow paths, piling it up under walls, around firewood stacks, and in all the sheltered spots, forming small snowdrifts as tall as one's calf.

The ditches on both sides of the road were filled with snow, leveling out with the path. If not for the withered yellow Artemisia twigs sticking out of the snow and rustling in the wind, Zhu Ping'an might not have been able to tell the road from the ditch.

A group of chickens in the village, led by a few roosters, were gathered under a pile of firewood and straw, leisurely searching for food. A few bored roosters flapped their wings, pecking at each other over a hen, causing the snow to fly in all directions with loud crackling sounds.

Near the village entrance, several mischievous children had set up a basket in the snow, scattered some broken grains beneath it, and were crouching with their butts in the air, waiting to trap sparrows.

When they saw Zhu Ping'an riding by, the sparrows flew away, and the children, sniffing and looking unfriendly, glared at him.

"This mountain is mine, this tree is mine; if you want to pass through, leave the toll."

A snot-nosed little brat stood in front of Zhu Ping'an's horse, hands on hips, looking up arrogantly. The other kids stood behind him, as backup, all staring at Zhu Ping'an with unfriendly expressions.

Looking at the group of mischievous children with snot running down their faces, Zhu Ping'an slightly curled his lips.

"I am a bird demon under the snow demon. I heard you were plotting against my subordinates here, so I transformed into human form to investigate. But it seems I've caught you red-handed. Tsk tsk, I've heard that children's meat is the best."

Zhu Ping'an, riding his horse, took a deep breath toward the children, then made a show of licking his lips in a delighted manner.

"Monster!"

The mischievous children, hearing this and seeing Zhu Ping'an's expression, screamed and ran off in a hurry.

"Uh, I was just joking with you."

Looking at the children running off, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but laugh and cry at the same time. These little brats were too innocent.

"We won't fall for your tricks!"

"Don't follow us, we have children's urine!"

The children, upon hearing this, stuck out their tongues at Zhu Ping'an and ran even faster. In the blink of an eye, they were out of sight.