

Rise 244

Chapter 244: The Helpful Huang Zandian

It was noon, and smoke was rising from the chimneys of every household in the village. The bluish-gray smoke stood in sharp contrast to the white snow, and gradually, the aroma of food permeated the entire village.

Watching the mischievous kids disappear while shouting loudly, Zhu Ping'an smiled slightly and shook his head. Then he dismounted, led his horse into the village, and stepped on the snow, which crunched underfoot.

This village wasn't as large as Xiahe Village, with only about thirty or forty households. Zhu Ping'an led his horse along the village's narrow path and stopped in front of a house where the snow had been cleared. He knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

Footsteps came from the courtyard, followed by a deep and rough male voice asking from inside.

Zhu Ping'an brushed the snow off his clothes and replied, "Sorry to bother you. I'm a passing scholar and would like to ask for a bowl of hot water."

As soon as Zhu Ping'an finished speaking, the courtyard gate opened. A sturdy man with dark, rough skin appeared at the door. He was dressed simply and wore worn-out clothes, with mud caked on his shoes.

"Sorry for the intrusion," Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands slightly, his face showing goodwill.

"It's no bother at all." The dark-skinned man seemed a bit flustered by Zhu Ping'an's polite gesture, scratching his head as he said, "If you don't mind, why not join us for a simple meal? My wife just finished cooking."

"Thank you, brother. I'll gladly accept your hospitality." Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands again in thanks.

The dark-skinned man, who appeared to be in his thirties, helped Zhu Ping'an tie the horse to the cowshed and even filled a broken basin with the cow's fodder for the dark horse.

It was clear that this was a simple and kind-hearted household.

However, the man seemed to have a disability in his left leg, limping as he walked. It was unclear whether it was a congenital issue or a recent injury. Still, he appeared to be very open about it, without the slightest attempt to hide it, and his face bore a bright, masculine expression.

The children in the house, curious about the guest, peeked out from inside to see what the visitor looked like.

Unexpectedly, as soon as the child saw Zhu Ping'an, he froze, shivered a little, pointed at Zhu Ping'an, and shouted, "A monster is here!"

"What nonsense are you spouting?" came a woman's voice from inside the house. She quickly pulled the child back in, seemingly to scold him. The naughty kid cried out loudly as he was disciplined.

What a coincidence—Zhu Ping'an had recognized this child the moment he saw him. He was the same brat who had arrogantly tried to "rob" him at the village entrance.

"This kid talks nonsense. Don't take it to heart, brother. Come on inside." The dark-skinned man was a bit embarrassed and invited Zhu Ping'an into the house.

The interior was somewhat dim. It took Zhu Ping'an two or three seconds to adjust to the lighting. The furnishings inside were very simple but clean. A woman was tidying the table—plainly dressed, but still somewhat attractive. The dark-skinned man was indeed lucky.

Although the hostess had some charm, to Zhu Ping'an—who had grown used to seeing the enchantingly cunning Li Shu—it didn't mean much. His heart remained calm.

Observing this, the man's impression of Zhu Ping'an improved greatly. He appreciated that Zhu Ping'an didn't ogle his wife like some men did.

"Sorry to trouble you, sister" Zhu Ping'an said with a slight bow.

"It's no trouble at all," the woman replied casually with a wave of her hand.

"He's a bird demon!"

The brat pointed at Zhu Ping'an and shouted, seemingly ready to use a stream of child's urine to vanquish the demon.

"Why are you so unruly?" The woman grabbed the child and looked ready to give him a good spanking.

"It's not his fault; I was just joking with them at the village entrance," Zhu Ping'an explained, blocking their way.

Zhu Ping'an had his own way of dealing with mischievous kids. He pulled out a piece of jerky from his pocket and managed to coax the troublemaker into calling him "brother" with a wagging tail. As for the bird demon, it was long forgotten with that piece of jerky.

The family's meal was simple—pickled radishes they had made themselves. But the flavor wasn't bad, especially when paired with millet porridge, which Zhu Ping'an ate two big bowls of.

Just as they were finishing their meal, the front door of the house was rudely kicked open. About five or six men barged in aggressively, shouting and swearing in the yard.

"Yang Dacheng, get out here!"

"Yang the Lame, come out quickly! The county magistrate has ordered you to repair the Great Wall as part of the labor assignment."

"Hahaha, if you don't want to go, that's fine too. I heard your wife is quite the beauty..."

Hearing this, the man eating inside slammed his chopsticks onto the table. He glanced apologetically at Zhu Ping'an before storming out of the house in a fit of rage.

"Don't push your luck!"

Yang Dacheng stormed out, grabbed a shovel from the corner of the yard, and glared with fury.

"Hahaha, Yang the Lame dares to make a move? Looks like the last lesson wasn't enough for you."

"What, you don't want that other leg anymore?"

Yang Dacheng's actions didn't intimidate the men in the yard; instead, they burst into loud laughter.

"Hey, what are you saying? We're on official business here. Don't be so crude, show some respect. The county magistrate has said this so many times already."

A middle-aged man, well-dressed in a long robe, lectured the others. His appearance wasn't impressive—he had a mustache that made him look like a shifty weasel, giving off the vibe of someone not to be trusted.

"Right, right, Huang Zandian, we'll take your advice," the men in official uniform nodded in agreement, clearly following Huang Zandian's lead.

Huang Zandian held a position as a "Zandian" in the Household Division of the county office, which wasn't quite an official title, but he was still somewhat respected. Although the county office was small, it was complete, with six departments: the Office of Rites, the Department of Finance, the Department of Military Affairs, the Department of Justice, the Department of Works, and the Department of Revenue. These departments acted like modern-day bureaus, each having one "official clerk," also known as a Zandian or scribe, with strict hierarchical distinctions.

While the county magistrate had the ultimate authority, managing a county's civil, criminal, and economic affairs was no small task. Therefore, the magistrate needed many assistants to distribute duties. These

"Zandians" didn't have official positions, nor did they receive salaries from the national treasury, but because they were in charge of the day-to-day operations of the county, the court still recognized their authority. They lacked official status but wielded significant power, often using their influence for personal gain, engaging in corruption, extortion, and exploiting the common people.

Huang Zandian, who was in charge of the Household Division, had earned his position thanks to his status as a scholar. As a result, he was considered the de facto second-in-command in the division, just below the head official. The Household Division was responsible for tax collection, land management, and public labor assignments. Huang Zandian had a say in these matters.

Those who read the classics often don't become sages.

Since he entered the Household Division, Huang Zandian's life had been quite comfortable, and his personal interests were fully indulged.

In truth, Huang Zandian didn't have many hobbies—just two: managing others' money and looking after women.

Of course, he had to help in these matters. Huang Zandian had a refined way of doing things. "Don't be polite with me, or I'll stop being polite with you."