

Rise 248

Chapter 248: What Grudge, What Hatred

"Please wait a moment, I'll go in and report right away. Just a moment, please, just a moment."

The duty clerk, after scolding the officer who had offended Zhu Ping'an, came before Zhu Ping'an with a hunched back and a face full of smiles, respectful and enthusiastic—completely different from earlier. Once he finished speaking, the duty clerk ran off toward the inner courtyard of the yamen to report, looking every bit the model of a diligent and dutiful civil servant.

At the sight of this scene outside the county office gates, Huang Zandian's mouth twitched. Did that Liu Tou get possessed or something?! Or did he suddenly realize that the bookish guy was his long-lost brother? That made no sense!

He felt stifled!

The officer holding the smelly sock touched his burning cheek—still stinging from the duty clerk's slap—and stared blankly at the clerk's retreating figure, feeling like his entire world had been turned upside down. It was like the whole world had suddenly gone wrong.

What shocked them even more was that, moments later, the county magistrate himself—whom they rarely saw even once a year—actually walked out from the back courtyard with a beaming smile, looking as radiant as a spring breeze despite the heavy snow.

That duty clerk followed behind the magistrate, head down and back bent.

"Greetings, Your Excellency," Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands and bowed before the magistrate reached the gate.

The magistrate of Tongcheng County was about fifty years old, and his face was shiny with oil.

No introduction was needed—Zhu Ping'an could recognize him at a glance as the magistrate, because not only was he wearing the black gauze hat of an official, he also wore a blue official robe embroidered with a *xī chī* (mandarin duck)—a colorful waterbird known to pair closely with its mate and often fly or swim together. In the Ming Dynasty, officials' robes followed strict regulations: those embroidered with a *xī chī* denoted a seventh-rank official. And within the county office, only the magistrate held a rank high enough to wear such a robe.

The phrase "beast in clothes" may sound like an insult today—accusing someone of behaving like an animal despite wearing proper clothes. But in the Ming Dynasty, if you said that to someone, they wouldn't be angry at all—in fact, they might happily invite you for tea. That's because in the Ming system, "civil officials wore birds, and military officials wore beasts." If you called someone a "beast in clothes," they might think you were saying they looked like an official.

Outside the county office gates, Huang Zandian saw that the bookish Zhu Ping'an merely cupped his hands in greeting when meeting the magistrate. Such a disrespectful gesture—surely he was doomed to face the magistrate's wrath.

"Greetings, Your Excellency!"

Huang Zandian led several officers forward with eager faces. They stepped past Zhu Ping'an and bowed low to the magistrate. The other officers even kneeled and kowtowed. For them, it wasn't every day they got to see the magistrate in person, so they were eager to seize this chance to make their presence known.

"Greetings, honorable magistrate."

Yang Dacheng and the female head of the household also trembled as they knelt on the ground. After Yang knelt, he nudged Zhu Ping'an's leg with his shoulder, trying to urge him to kneel as well, afraid that Zhu might offend the magistrate and get punished.

"There's no need to be so polite, my dear brother."

The magistrate approached, smiling warmly as he spoke with gentle reproach.

Dear brother?

Hearing this while bowing before the magistrate, Huang Zandian nearly wept with joy. Did I just hear that? The magistrate called me "dear brother"? In an instant, a warm rush surged from the soles of his feet to the top of his head. With that one address, wouldn't he have a chance to rise from Huang Zandian to Clerk Huang? Actually, you can just call me Little Huang—you don't have to call me 'dear brother,' Your Excellency... In his heart, Huang Zandian was practically flying with joy.

Just as Huang Zandian excitedly lifted his head, however, he saw that the magistrate didn't even spare him a glance—instead, he smiled and walked straight over to Zhu Ping'an.

"No need for such formality, dear brother. I've long heard of your good name. In this recent county-level imperial exam, you truly brought honor to our Anqing Prefecture. Come, let's have a chat in the inner courtyard."

The magistrate of Tongcheng was all smiles as he reached out to invite Zhu Ping'an to the back office.

"Your Excellency overpraises me. I was merely fortunate. Compared to your administration and enlightenment in Tongcheng, I am nothing more than a firefly before the bright moon. The illustrious reputation of Tongcheng as the 'thoroughfare of seven provinces,' the 'capital of Chinese culture,' and the 'foremost city of Jianghuai' is well known across the land—this is all thanks to Your Excellency's merit. I had not had the honor of meeting you until today; it is truly a blessing of three lifetimes."

With an admiring smile, Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in thanks to the magistrate, then suddenly changed the subject. Looking apologetically at the magistrate and then at Huang Zandian, he continued:

"However, I'm afraid I cannot accompany Your Excellency to the back office. This Huang Zandian here still intends to take me to the county jail."

The excitement on Huang Zandian's face instantly turned into sheer terror—just what kind of person had he provoked?

Just moments ago, he thought this was merely a powerless, useless bookworm. But in the blink of an eye, the magistrate himself was treating the man with such deference. From the magistrate's words, it turned out this so-called bookworm had just passed this year's special imperial examination and was apparently a standout among the successful candidates.

A juren, and such a young juren at that—when he was that age, he had still been worrying over passing the county-level exam! Damn it, the comparison is enough to drive one mad with envy.

And to think he had believed the man was just a naive and pedantic scholar. Yet just now, the man's flattery flowed more smoothly and effectively than anything Huang Zandian himself could have mustered.

How deep was his scheming? From the moment Huang Zandian had stepped into Yang Dacheng's house, this man had been hiding his true self, only revealing his fangs now upon meeting the magistrate.

This was clearly a tiger wearing a pig's skin!

Realizing whom he had provoked, Huang Zandian was overwhelmed with dread, his face ashen. What grudge do I have with you? Why are you doing this to me?

"Oh? What is the meaning of this?"

The Tongcheng magistrate turned, squinting slightly as he looked at Huang Zandian.

"M-my lord, I... I..."

Huang Zandian's face turned deathly pale. His hands trembled uncontrollably. He couldn't get a full sentence out—he was utterly falling apart.

This scholar was too ruthless, too cunning! He had used the Spring and Autumn brushwork—carefully selective wording—to avoid mentioning other matters, and instead directly focused on the fact that Huang Zandian had wanted to throw him in jail. If it were about Yang Dacheng, he might have found ways to deflect responsibility. But this? How could he possibly explain away wanting to imprison a juren?

Even a magistrate didn't have the authority to jail a juren; it required approval from the imperial educational commissioner and the official revocation of the juren status by the court. And yet, Huang Zandian—just a petty officer—had dared to try and throw a juren into jail.

This one misstep destroyed everything. With this first impression, no one would believe his explanations for anything else that followed.

So ruthless. So calculating!

Looking at Zhu Ping'an's smiling face, Huang Zandian felt as if a tiger had opened its bloody maw at him. His whole body felt as though it had fallen into an ice cave. Why did I ever mess with someone this terrifying? He was filled with regret and fear, drowning in both with no tears left to cry.