

Rise 249

Chapter 249: An Unexpected Harvest

The snow, just like yesterday, drifted down in fluttering flakes. Looking out into the distance, the entire world was a field of pure white. The autumn trees, already stripped bare of leaves, seemed to have gained a second life, blooming with white flowers of snow.

"Brother Yang, there's no need to see me off any further."

Zhu Ping'an, mounted on horseback, waved goodbye to Yang Dacheng and his family, who had come to see him off by the roadside at the village entrance.

"Benefactor, why not stay another day and wait for the snow to stop before continuing on your journey? What happened yesterday—our whole family truly owes our lives to you. You're our savior. Please stay a few more days until the snow clears. Leaving in such a hurry—could it be that you find our hospitality lacking?"

Yang Dacheng and his family tried their best to persuade Zhu Ping'an to stay, expressing heartfelt gratitude. If it hadn't been for Zhu Ping'an, disaster would have surely befallen them. Given how ruthless Huang Zandian was, he would have torn their family apart. It was only thanks to Zhu Ping'an's help that the Yang family was spared. The county magistrate had stripped Huang Zandian of his student scholar status, then investigated and confirmed all of his past crimes and imprisoned him. The other officers were punished accordingly based on the severity of their crimes, lifting the Yang family's worries for the future.

"Brother Yang, I was already grateful to be allowed to stay the night. Today, I must hit the road. The journey to the capital is a thousand miles long, and the exam date is drawing near—I can't delay any longer." Zhu Ping'an declined with a sheepish smile from atop his horse.

"Big brother, I want to study and become the top scholar too!"

The mischievous child following Yang Dacheng looked up at Zhu Ping'an and shouted loudly.

"Hehe, that's great! Then I'll be waiting for you in the capital," Zhu Ping'an turned back with a smile, then cupped his hands in farewell to the Yang family.

In the falling snow, a lone rider followed the official road northward, gradually disappearing from the Yang family's sight.

"He's the benefactor of our Yang family. Later I'll go find a painter to make a portrait of him. On New Year's and other festivals, we'll offer incense and bow in gratitude."

Yang Dacheng said to his wife, gazing at Zhu Ping'an's departing figure.

Traveling north along the official road, Zhu Ping'an suddenly sneezed and rubbed his nose, feeling a bit puzzled.

The snow kept falling for another day and night before it finally stopped. During the day, Zhu Ping'an journeyed onward; at night, he would find a local home to stay in. Each morning, he would continue his journey, always leaving about ten copper coins for the host family when he left.

On the third night, he stopped at the relay station in Shucheng County. Thanks to his status as a juren (a successful provincial exam candidate), he was able to eat and stay for free. Relay stations had reception standards, and the standard for receiving a juren was modest at best. However, due to the harsh winter and few travelers, Zhu Ping'an was treated above the standard. Dinner consisted of one meat dish, one vegetable, and a soup. He stayed in a private room, and they even provided hot water and a bath tub for him.

After bathing in hot water, Zhu Ping'an felt like a new person, all his fatigue completely washed away.

It had been several days since he'd read by lamplight at night. When staying with villagers, he had been reluctant to inconvenience them. For farming families, oil lamps were used very sparingly, so Zhu Ping'an had been going to bed early and setting aside his long-standing habit of reading at night.

At the relay station, there was no such concern. After tidying the table, he lit the oil lamp. Even though he turned it up as bright as possible, it couldn't compare to the modern fluorescent lamps—only a dim yellow glow remained.

However, the faint yellow lamplight and the subtle fragrance of ink made a perfect pair, drawing one in deeply.

First, he recorded bits and pieces of his journey from the past few days, treating it as a travel journal. That way, when he returned home and his parents asked, he could tell his mother about it. After finishing his journal, Zhu Ping'an selected a book from those he had brought—Collected Annotations on the Analects—and began reading.

"The Master said: The gentleman seeks the Way, not a livelihood. Though farming may bring hunger, study brings its own reward. The gentleman is concerned with the Way, not with poverty."

"The Master said: The gentleman does not seek to eat his fill, nor to live in comfort. He is diligent in affairs and cautious in speech. He aligns himself with those who follow the Way and is upright. This can be called a lover of learning."

There is a vast world in each character, and the light of the sun and moon shines through each passage. After braving the wind and snow, reading by lamplight at night was its own kind of pleasure. Ink quenched thirst, and books relieved fatigue. The dim oil lamp cast a long shadow of a hand unwilling to put down the scroll.

At midnight, he blew out the lamp and went to sleep, enjoying a night of beautiful dreams.

North of Shucheng County was Lu'an County, which was under the jurisdiction of Luzhou Prefecture.

Early the next morning, Zhu Ping'an grabbed a free breakfast at the relay station before continuing his journey. After traveling for about three hours, he entered Lu'an County. The terrain here was hilly and mountainous, and a section of the road was not connected to the official highway. Zhu Ping'an had to ride along a dirt path, which passed through an area with sparse population.

By midday, he had crossed a low mountain area and stopped at the foot of the mountain to build a fire and roast dried meat for lunch. He drank from the gourd of water he carried with him. After finishing his meal, he mounted his horse again and continued on his way, hoping to reach a more populated area soon.

"Hmph."

Not long after riding, Zhu Ping'an spotted a large black wild boar, weighing about 300 pounds, rummaging around at the foot of the mountain, likely starving due to the heavy snow that had sealed off the mountain in recent days.

Upon seeing the wild boar, Zhu Ping'an became alert.

Zhu Ping'an lived at the foot of the mountain and knew wild boars very well. When he was young, his father and older brother had managed to hunt one, but they were both injured in the process. After that, Zhu's father repeatedly warned Zhu Ping'an and his brother not to try to take on a wild boar if they encountered one in the wild. The best strategy was to leave before it attacked. His father said even seasoned hunters wouldn't dare hunt wild boars alone, as it took three to five experienced hunters to have a chance at taking one down.

Wild boars, especially the adults, had remarkable combat abilities. When they charged, they could knock over a tree, let alone a human. Furthermore, wild boars weren't strictly herbivores; they were omnivores, which meant they ate meat—including humans.

With the heavy snow sealing off the mountain, this particular wild boar, weighing over 300 pounds, was considered a big one. Seeing how it was scavenging around, clearly starving, Zhu Ping'an was even more cautious.

On one hand, he was wary of the wild boar, and on the other, he was also on guard against the moronic "Shamate" (a nickname for a type of silly, fashionable person) black horse doing something stupid.

As expected, after the wild boar failed to find any food, it saw Zhu Ping'an and the Shamate black horse and rushed at them without hesitation.

Zhu Ping'an had already prepared for this. He yanked on the reins of the black horse, steering it in a wide arc to avoid the boar's charge.

After missing its target, the starving wild boar went wild, its ears perked up, and its fur standing on end. It let out a loud, guttural grunt and aggressively pursued them.

The crazed boar was surprisingly fast, especially on the mountain slopes, where it had the advantage of the terrain.

Zhu Ping'an, calm as ever, steered the black horse up a hill, then made another arc and sped downhill.

The wild boar, already fast, gained even more speed downhill and was closing in fast.

At that moment, Zhu Ping'an pulled the reins, causing the black horse to make a sharp turn. A large rock suddenly appeared in front of them. The wild boar was charging down the hill so fast that it couldn't stop in time and crashed directly into the rock.

The deafening sound of the collision made Zhu Ping'an feel a bit stunned. "That was a lot of force."

It seemed the wild boar wasn't quick-witted, confirming the joke about the black-and-white old sow Zhao Uncle had once told: wild boars just couldn't make quick decisions.

About ten minutes later, Zhu Ping'an, riding the black horse, continued along the mountain path. This time, however, the black horse was pulling a makeshift sled made from tree branches, on which lay the dead wild boar.

Zhu Ping'an hadn't expected that the wild boar's crash would result in its death. To him, it was an unexpected harvest.

Adhering to the principle of not wasting, he decided to make use of the boar's meat.