

## Rise 255

### Chapter 255: Making Friends Through Literature

The smoke and clouds of a hundred miles cannot compare to a single day in the capital. The capital is truly prosperous, and the people who live there possess an inherent pride. Even the beggars basking in the sunlight by the city walls carry themselves as if they were someone of importance. Give them a few coins, and they won't even spare you a glance.

The streets are bustling and neat, stretching endlessly, with people coming and going like the tide of the sea. There are also foreign merchants with blonde hair and blue eyes, speaking in strange accents while conducting business. The grandeur of the capital cannot be captured by mere words.

Bold and grand, the prosperity is like smoke.

Zhu Ping'an, leading his black horse with a distinctively punk look, reluctantly left the beggars behind and entered the capital. He looked left and right, overwhelmed by the sights, feeling like a country bumpkin. He wandered about, and before he knew it, it was already past four in the afternoon. Dinner time was approaching, and he had yet to have lunch. The hunger pangs came more frequently. Zhu Ping'an, still holding the horse, began looking for a place to stay and eat, only to realize that he had already reached Chongren Gate in the inner city.

Chongren Gate, now known as Dongzhimen, was where the carts delivering firewood and charcoal to the capital passed through, hence it was also called the Firewood Road. The street is very long, stretching beyond the eye's reach, with shops on both sides—selling oil, salt, vegetables, soy sauce, and so on. Everyday necessities could be found here, all at reasonable prices, making the street particularly crowded.

But since he had reached Chongren Gate, why not explore the inner city while he was here?

Unlike the Qing Dynasty, where the inner city was reserved for the Eight Banners, the Ming Dynasty's inner city allowed common people to live there. The Ming Dynasty's imperial city housed high-ranking officials and royal relatives, while the inner city was home to middle- and lower-ranking officials and ordinary citizens.

The inner city of the capital is even more prosperous.

While Zhu Ping'an was searching for a place to stay and eat, he was suddenly drawn to a luxurious-looking inn not far ahead. This inn had a particularly eye-catching cloth banner, with four flowing calligraphy characters at the top. Below were specific details in regular script: "To meet friends through literature. This inn welcomes friends through literature and offers special rewards for couplets. For two couplets, one day's food and lodging are free (no limit on the number of people); for three couplets, three days' food and lodging are free (no limit on the number of people); for five couplets, ten days' food and lodging are free (limited to five people); for six couplets, one month's food and lodging are free (limited to three people)."

Seeing this striking banner, Zhu Ping'an slightly curled the corners of his mouth. This was a typical setup; he finally encountered it himself.

This inn was quite skilled at attracting customers. With such a big banner, it would surely draw many scholars. The inn didn't spend much, yet it became well-known in no time. One must not underestimate the ingenuity of the ancients.

The capital was so vast, and inns were as numerous as hairs on an ox. Yet, this particular inn stood out with just a cloth banner. The owner was certainly a shrewd businessman. This marketing technique was almost as effective as modern-day coupon promotions.

Sure enough, as Zhu Ping'an led his Shamat black horse toward the inn, he could already hear the lively voices inside.

There were too many people in the inn—scholarly youths in elegant robes, dignified young masters from wealthy families, some came for the free food and lodging, others to make a name for themselves, and some were just passing by. The older and younger guests stood in the hall, either whispering or discussing loudly while admiring the hanging couplets.

At that moment, a well-dressed young man was attempting to compose a couplet. Halfway through, he shook his head with a wry smile and stepped down.

"Wensheng, be content. I've only composed two couplets, but you've already composed three. Who knows how long the innkeeper took to dig these couplets out of some obscure corner?"

Another young man, dressed similarly, smiled proudly as he patted Wensheng on the shoulder. Half comforting, half boasting, he looked at the others.

Indeed, he had something to boast about. The young man named Wensheng was one of the few who managed to compose three couplets that day. Besides him, only three others had succeeded in composing three. Most people could only sigh in frustration, with only a few managing to come up with one. Those who composed three couplets, like Wensheng, were extremely rare. Those who could come up with a couplet were lucky, but they were usually already taken by others.

The couplets had been up for two days, and the best record was still three couplets.

After Wensheng stepped down, the other guests in the inn either stroked their beards in contemplation or curiously asked the two young men for their names to exchange ideas. Even the innkeeper and the staff were all watching intently as people deciphered the couplets in the hall.

For a moment, no one saw the dusty and weary Zhu Ping'an standing at the door of the inn.

"Ahem, excuse me, are there any rooms available?"

Seeing the people who were engrossed and focused, the bustling crowd made it so that neither the innkeeper nor the shop assistants could be found. Therefore, Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to cough and loudly ask in the direction of the inn's lobby.

The people, who were concentrating on the couplets, suddenly heard a loud inquiry. Instinctively, they turned their heads to look toward the door.

Then, they saw a person and a horse at the entrance.

The person at the inn's door was a simple-looking young man, somewhat dark-skinned, wearing clothes that had been washed so much they were faded and had two holes. He was holding a horse that looked like it had been used for farm work.

The people who were focused on the couplets glanced at him and quickly concluded: This was a poor young man from the countryside, here to stay with relatives.

As a result, they only glanced at Zhu Ping'an and then returned to their focus on the couplets, not paying him any attention.

"Hehe, sir, I'm terribly sorry, but our inn is fully booked. You might want to try somewhere else." A shop assistant squeezed out of the crowd and, looking at Zhu Ping'an from a distance, waved his hand.

Upon hearing this, Zhu Ping'an led the Shamat black horse out of the inn.

The shop assistant was quite pleased with Zhu Ping'an's timely departure and, apologetically smiling at everyone, apologized for the disturbance Zhu Ping'an had caused, assuring them that there would be no more interruptions to their focus on the couplets.

"Ahem, excuse me..."

Just as the people had only just refocused on their task, they heard the same voice as before ringing out from the door again. Turning their heads, they saw the same person and horse who had just left, peering back in.

"Hey, what's the matter with you? Didn't you just hear that we are fully booked?" The inn's shop assistant looked impatiently at the young man at the door.

"I just took another look, and it says outside that meals and lodging are free, and there's no limit on the number of people. With so many people still here, there should be a room available, right?"

Zhu Ping'an, holding the Shamat black horse, stood just a step from the door, pointing at the cloth sign hanging above with a slight smile as he asked.

"That's for the people who are working on the couplets, not for you. You should go find another inn," the shop assistant waved his hand impatiently, signaling Zhu Ping'an to leave, so as not to disturb the intellectual concentration of the important guests inside. If this poor country boy caused any damage to the inn's business, the shop assistant wouldn't be able to handle the consequences.