

## Rise 301

### Chapter 301: Heroes Rise Amidst the Turmoil of the World

“Zihou, you really don’t know how to cherish a fair lady’s affection. Poor Qingqing and her heartfelt feelings...” After they walked some distance, Zhang Siwei glanced back and shook his head, teasing Zhu Ping’an.

“Falling flowers are full of affection, but the flowing water is heartless,” said Wang Shizhen, dressed in white like snow, hands clasped behind his back, smiling leisurely.

“I was merely joking. I thought you’d be moved by my unselfish spirit of doing good without seeking reward,” Zhu Ping’an shook his head slightly and smiled.

“Come on, heartless Zhu Zihou! Didn’t you see the affectionate look in that young lady’s eyes?” Zhang Siwei nudged Zhu Ping’an with his shoulder and teased.

“I only wanted to save that old man, not because of the young lady,” Zhu Ping’an replied with an open smile, like a ray of winter sunlight warming the earth.

“Zihou, a true gentleman,” Wang Shizhen said seriously with a sigh.

The three chatted casually along the way, and before long they reached the foot of Mount Chongfu, where the Chongfu Zen Temple stood—reputed to be the oldest temple in the capital.

If Zhang Siwei hadn't been leading, Zhu Ping'an wouldn't have found the place. The temple was tucked away in a narrow alley, with incense vendors at the entrance and people chanting "Amitabha." From the moment they passed the mountain gate, a thick fragrance of incense and an inexplicable solemnity filled the entire courtyard.

Once inside the gate, urged by Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen, Zhu Ping'an bought three sticks of incense like they did and headed towards the Mahavira Hall. The courtyard was lined with ancient pine, cypress, and locust trees. Birds chirped incessantly in the trees, seemingly unaffected by the chants or the crowd, bold and lively. Even birds walking about on the ground didn't fly away as people approached—they merely hopped aside. Perhaps they were often fed by worshipers or monks.

As they neared the Mahavira Hall, they heard harmonious chanting, occasionally punctuated by the crisp sound of a wooden fish. Entering the hall, they saw a monk reciting scriptures. There were quite a few people inside—some stood with palms pressed together in reverent prayer, while others wandered or conversed. There were also many scholarly-looking young men like Zhu Ping'an and his companions.

In truth, offering incense is more a form of psychological comfort. Zhu Ping'an didn't take it to heart, and neither did Zhang Siwei or Wang Shizhen.

On the contrary, the three were very interested in the scenic apricot blossoms on the hill behind the temple.

Unfortunately, to their disappointment, the small gate leading to the apricot grove was guarded by several men, all looking stern and unwelcoming.

“Move along, move along. The rear hill is reserved by our master,” said one of the guards arrogantly, waving them away when he saw the three approaching. Despite their fine clothing, the guard showed them no respect.

“Why? This temple was built by public donations, not your master’s private estate,” Wang Shizhen stepped forward to reason with them.

“Back where you came from. This is for your own good,” one guard said, waving dismissively.

“No need to talk nonsense with them. Who do they think they are? Get lost now, or don’t blame us for being rough!” another guard said even more rudely, holding a sheathed long sword, nose in the air, squinting arrogantly as he threatened the trio.

“Boldly flaunting weapons and making threats. Aren’t you afraid of being arrested by the city patrol?” Zhang Siwei pulled Wang Shizhen behind him and glared at the guard, speaking loudly.

At Zhang Siwei’s righteous rebuke, the guards were momentarily stunned, then exchanged glances and burst into mocking laughter.

“Hahaha... the city patrol? Let the Five-City Garrison try it! Let’s see if they even have the guts!”

“The Five-City Garrison? Even the imperial secret police wouldn’t dare!”

“I don’t care who you are. Now, before you disturb our master, get lost!”

The guards laughed contemptuously and shooed them away again.

“May I ask who your esteemed master is?” Zhu Ping’an reached out to stop Zhang Siwei and asked the guards.

“Hmph, don’t be frightened when I tell you—our master is none other than Lord Yan, Assistant Minister Yan,” the guard said arrogantly.

Assistant Minister Yan?

Ah, that would be Yan Shifan. Thanks to his father Yan Song’s influence, Yan Shifan had been directly admitted to the Imperial College. While countless scholars were still struggling through the county, provincial, and metropolitan exams, Yan Shifan had gone straight into office upon graduation. He never needed to take any of those exams. His rise in rank was as swift as a rocket—he was already Left Assistant Minister of Works.

That’s equivalent to today’s Deputy Minister of Construction—a lucrative post indeed.

No wonder even the doorkeepers were so arrogant—it was Yan Shifan himself inside.

Zhang Siwei, Zhu Ping'an, and Wang Shizhen exchanged glances. Though Zhang and Wang held no goodwill toward Yan Song and his son, they still dreaded their power. After all, Yan Song remained the top-ranking official in the court, and Yan Shifan himself held a deputy ministerial post. Zhu Ping'an and his companions were still praying for success in the exams—they weren't even minor officials yet.

Feudal society, indeed. Even admiring some apricot blossoms required closing off a whole mountain temple!

Historically speaking, Yan Shifan was a formidable character. Yan Song, already elderly, remained in power thanks in large part to Yan Shifan's behind-the-scenes strategies and administrative support.

Also, Yan Shifan was infamous for his vile character.

Zhu Ping'an was still contemplating how to prevent conflict in case Wang Shizhen got riled up and insisted on barging in. No need to worry about Zhang Siwei—he had the patience of Goujian in his bones.

But to Zhu Ping'an's surprise, as soon as Wang Shizhen heard that Yan Shifan was in the apricot grove, he wore an expression of utter disdain and turned around to leave.

Zhu Ping'an and Zhang Siwei followed suit, turning away and walking off.

The guards sneered at their retreating figures, clearly used to seeing people slink away like that.

"With that man inside, the apricot grove surely holds nothing worth seeing," Wang Shizhen said with scorn, glancing back at the rear hill as he walked away.

"I've long heard of Yan the blind's greed and lust. Locking down the rear hill, I bet he's up to some shady business!" Zhang Siwei sneered.

"Heh, I even heard that fat Yan has a taste for young men. You two are lucky you didn't go in," Zhu Ping'an chuckled, recalling some gossip he'd read in modern times.

"No way?" Wang Shizhen twitched at the words, seemingly unconvinced.

"I've heard the same. Yan the blind does have a fondness for the 'Peach and Dragon' kind, though he's more often after women," Zhang Siwei nodded.

“Indulging in pleasures, ignoring state affairs—entrusting national governance to such people is a tragedy for the country and its people!” Wang Shizhen shook his head, sighing with deep disdain.

“Given the current situation, I fear it won’t change anytime soon,” Zhu Ping’an patted Wang Shizhen on the shoulder, shaking his head. He knew history—Yan Song and his son would remain in power for another ten years.

“Indeed...” Zhang Siwei greatly admired Zhu Ping’an’s insight. He had come to the same conclusion through family conversations, and seeing Zhu discern it so quickly upon arriving in the capital earned his respect.

“A sorrow and a disgrace,” Wang Shizhen lamented deeply.

On that sunny early spring afternoon, on a path near Chongfu Zen Temple, the three of them looked at each other for a long while. Then Zhang Siwei looked at Wang Shizhen, then at Zhu Ping’an, and solemnly declared:

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. With talents like yours, greatness is within reach. I am willing to strive alongside you. When the time comes, we shall rise amid the storm, serve in court or in battle, support the nation, and build an everlasting legacy—to restore clarity to the world!”

Zhu Ping’an and Wang Shizhen exchanged a look, then turned to the spirited Zhang Siwei. Stepping forward, they nodded resolutely.

From the heroes rise the tempests of the world; once entering the arena, the years fly swiftly by.