

Rise 325

Chapter 325: Yan Donglou

Fish, that I desire; bear's paw, too, that I desire. When both are placed before me, I shall gnaw at them slowly.

Zhu Ping'an sat quietly in a corner, placing a dish of shark fin and a dish of bear's paw before him without a sound. There, in the corner, he played the part of a silent glutton, watching Little Comrade Ouyang act pretentious in silence.

If he didn't eat his fill, if he didn't eat well, then this stepping stone of his might just turn into a stumbling block.

Just moments ago, he had been forced to down cup after cup of wine. Though he had managed to spill some into the towel hidden in his sleeve, and let a little slip into his teacup while drinking tea, still he felt a little dizzy now. Fortunately, while Little Comrade Ouyang was brandishing his words with youthful arrogance, the others busied themselves with flattery, paying him little heed.

Drinking on an empty stomach harms the body. So, Zhu Ping'an seized this chance to quietly indulge as a glutton.

Yan Shifan, however, held his liquor well. He refused no one, and the more he drank, the more arrogant he grew. His actions turned wild, reckless, shouting without restraint as if no one else were present.

At this banquet, there were three factions of guests. Yan Shifan carried his wine cup over to those neutral and even faintly hostile toward him, demanding they drink. Most, cowed by his authority, raised their cups and drank one by one. Only an elder barely touched the wine to his lips before setting the cup down.

“Oh? Elder, are you making fun of me?” Yan Shifan placed his plump hand heavily on the old man’s shoulder, smiling broadly as he spoke.

“I am not skilled at drinking,” the elder replied with his face unchanged, glancing at Yan Shifan with a calm voice.

“Oh, so the elder is not skilled at drinking?” Yan Shifan nodded in feigned realization, then leaned closer, fat cheeks quivering, his smile baring white teeth. “Truly not skilled at drinking?”

“Indeed.” The elder’s tone carried no hesitation.

“Oh, then good. I’ve heard that in the elder’s wine cellar lies more than thirty vats of ‘Shandong Qiulu White.’ Heh heh heh. Since the elder is not skilled at drinking, why waste such fine liquor? Better let us enjoy it instead, eh?” Yan Shifan’s fat hand pressed on the elder’s shoulder, his wide grin gleaming with rows of white teeth.

“You—?”

The elder was astonished, wondering how Yan Shifan knew of his private stash. Even he himself did not know the exact count of vats, yet Yan Shifan named the number precisely—over thirty.

“What about me?” Yan Shifan widened his eyes with mock grievance. “Since the elder is not skilled at drinking, I only thought to do him the favor.”

“Yes, yes indeed...” Luo Longwen and the other lackeys chimed in, rushing to echo Yan Shifan.

“Qiulu White, brewed in Shandong, sweet and mellow, pale in color, fiery in nature—yet not to my taste. Though the Inspector tinkered with it, it was never truly refined. Only Prince Wang’s protégé, Xue Sheng, brewed it with lotus dew, yielding a fragrance most rare, though it can hardly be found. Still, among the seven famed wines of the realm, this Shandong Qiulu White ranks at the top. Elder, to refuse it would be to spurn such heavenly nectar.” Yan Shifan’s fat cheeks trembled as he laughed, white teeth flashing, his voice filled with mockery.

“No need trouble yourself, Lord Yan. I would not waste such wine,” the elder retorted, flinging his sleeve and shaking off Yan Shifan’s heavy hand.

“See, elder, why so polite? All here know I, Yan Shifan, am ever eager to lend a hand. Why hold back with me? Ha ha ha...”

Yan Shifan laughed, showing no anger, instead laying his hand once more, heavily, upon the old man’s shoulder. Again he leaned his broad face close, grinning white-toothed. “I am only curious—this Qiulu White does not come cheap. A single vat costs several months of your salary. Thirty vats—why, that’s several hundred taels of silver. Elder, in these seven or eight years, have you been living on wind and dew alone?”

At those words, the elder's face paled. Years ago, when he served in Shandong, his conduct had indeed been less than clean.

Watching the change in the elder's face, Yan Shifan sneered. This old crow—sees only the pig's black hide, blind to his own!

“Before tomorrow evening, deliver one thousand seven hundred and eighty-five taels of silver to my residence. And the Qiulu White. Do not make me wait in vain. If I grow angry, even I fear myself.” Yan Shifan whispered this into the elder's ear, grinning wide, white teeth gleaming.

At that, the elder's face grew deathly pale, as though he had seen a ghost. His heart nearly leapt from his chest. One thousand seven hundred and eighty-five taels... In his year in Shandong, he had pocketed just that much—no more, no less. Yan Shifan's demanded sum was exact, to the last coin. Truly uncanny.

“Bring a big bowl!”

Yan Shifan ignored the elder's shock, waving to a maid.

The maid glided forward with a large bowl. Yan Shifan snatched it, his plump paw landing squarely on her shapely hip with a smack. The maid turned her head, casting him a coquettish glance.

“My lord is so naughty...” she murmured with a teasing pout.

“Heh heh heh, tonight I’ll show you naughtier still,” Yan Shifan chuckled, cheeks quivering.

Having teased the maid, he filled the large bowl from the flowing stream of wine until it brimmed, nearly spilling over.

“Heh heh heh, I knew it—the elder merely found the earlier cup too small. Now, with this sea-bowl, he may drink to his heart’s content.”

Yan Shifan slammed the brimming bowl before the elder, spilling wine all over, his one sharp eye fixing firmly upon the man.

That single eye bore down with such pressure that the elder felt more cowed than even before the Emperor himself.

“Cough, cough... Lord Yan is thoughtful indeed. A big bowl is more fitting.”

The elder coughed, then, under the eyes of all, grit his teeth, raised the bowl, his beard dipping into the wine, and drank. Wine spilled down his lips and chin, yet still he gulped it down.

Moments later, he collapsed on the table, dead drunk.

“Hahaha! Truly, the elder has a mighty capacity!” Yan Shifan clapped his hands in laughter at the sight of the man sprawled unconscious.

The other guests, long accustomed to such spectacles, laughed along, playing games with dice. The atmosphere of the banquet grew livelier still.

In the corner, Zhu Ping’an watched silently. When Yan Shifan first forced the elder to drink, he had several times considered stepping forward to drink in his stead. Yet reason held him still, and when he saw the duel of words that followed, he discerned the elder’s guilty conscience. The old man was hardly clean himself.

Dog bites dog—both end up with a mouthful of fur.

Better for me to remain here, quietly, as a happy little glutton.