

Rise 327

Chapter 327: Wait... Something Feels Off

Zhu Ping'an's poem had completely stolen the spotlight at the banquet. The line, "From here to the Spring Terrace, I'll summon my old troops; with banners numbering a hundred thousand, we shall cut down the king of hell," was nothing short of stunning. This was what it meant to serve one's country to the very end, to give one's life without regret. While alive, he would drive out the barbarian invaders and the Japanese pirates for his homeland; if he died in battle, he would still summon his old troops from the Nine Nether Springs and continue serving the nation.

Where else could one find such lofty ambition?

"Talking from the paper... You're just a frail scholar. You've never set foot on the battlefield, never commanded an army, and you think you can summon a hundred thousand troops from the Spring Terrace? What a delusion!"

As always, Luo Longwen was especially attentive to Zhu Ping'an, pointing out the impracticalities in his poem "Loyalty and Devotion to the Nation."

"Your words are fair, Lord Luo," Zhu Ping'an said with a calm smile, the corner of his mouth tugged slightly. "I was reckless, imagining I had a million troops in my chest."

His smile was light as clouds drifting in the wind—effortless and unbothered. He didn't argue with Luo Longwen. Simply showing that he wasn't a pushover was enough.

The banquet continued. Having learned their lesson, Luo Longwen and his group avoided involving Zhu Ping'an in any further poetry or literary exercises. Without Zhu Ping'an causing mischief, Ouyang Xiao still shone brilliantly, earning unanimous praise—though Zhu Ping'an's "Loyalty and Devotion to the Nation" hung like a fishbone in the throat, slightly marring Ouyang Xiao's perfect moment.

At the banquet, Zhu Ping'an also gathered plenty of news—gossip, court affairs, coastal incidents.

After the palace examination, Ouyang Xiao was to become engaged to Miss No. 2 of the Yan household.

News of the Japanese pirates capturing Ningbo, Shaoxing, and Songyang reached the capital. Emperor Jiajing was furious, and a furnace of alchemy had been ruined. An edict dispatched Yu Dayou and others to lead troops for rescue and suppression.

That old rascal Li Mo had been appointed Minister of Personnel by imperial decree, personally inscribed with the characters "Loyal and Good." The emperor even permitted him to ride horseback through the palace gates—almost rivaling Elder Yan in privilege.

Of course, there was also plenty of drinking. Several men seated beneath Luo Longwen, seemingly by instruction, came over to offer Zhu Ping'an multiple cups of wine, as if determined to get him drunk at the banquet.

Zhu Ping'an had no choice but to deploy his ultimate move—the urination escape.

Leaving the banquet hall, a maid followed to assist him. Zhu Ping'an was overwhelmed. A young man raised under the Red Flag had never experienced such luxury—having a maid accompany him even to the toilet, and a lovely one at that!

The Yan household certainly knew how to enjoy life; even toilet visits required service!

Though, if he let the maid serve him, he probably wouldn't be able to... you know.

So, Zhu Ping'an simply had the maid point him toward the "changing area" (toilet) and politely declined her help, heading there alone.

The Yan estate was vast. The maid had directed him to a bamboo garden, and after wandering along the paths for a bit, Zhu Ping'an found the toilet. It was extravagantly built—had it not been labeled "changing area," he might have mistaken it for a pavilion in the garden.

Rumor had it, the Yan father and son's private toilets were even more exquisite, with intricately carved jade figurines in lifelike poses... though who knew if it was true.

After finishing, Zhu Ping'an found a quiet spot in the bamboo grove to rest. The cool breeze sobered him significantly.

When he attempted to return to the banquet, he realized he had taken the wrong path. Exiting the bamboo grove, he found himself in a delicate garden filled with fragrant flowers, not the way he had entered.

The garden was quiet. No maids or attendants were in sight, though faint sounds came from one of the rooms.

Returning late might provoke Luo Longwen again. Yan Shifan was clearly not someone to take lightly. If Zhu Ping'an got into trouble, he'd be in serious danger. To find the quickest route back, he decided to ask the room's occupants for directions.

"Excuse me..."

Zhu Ping'an stepped into the room, bowing slightly. But as soon as he began speaking, he froze. A pair of eyes nearly made him spit out his heart. Oh no, not like this...

Inside, a steaming bath filled with flower petals awaited. Beside it stood a girl, freshly emerged from the bath, her slender, fair arms draped in a silk sash, delicately holding another to dry herself. Her eyes widened at Zhu Ping'an's abrupt intrusion.

What to do? What to do?

Zhu Ping'an's mind raced. His drunkenness vanished instantly.

No matter whether the girl was a maid or the lady of the house, being seen like this was scandalous—even in modern society, let alone in the rigid etiquette of Ming China.

The girl, initially frozen, would surely scream at the intrusion. A “lecherous intruder” in the Yan household could spell disaster.

If she were just a maid, perhaps it would be manageable. But if she were the mistress—say, Miss No. 2, the one Ouyang Xiao was to be engaged to after the palace exam—then Zhu Ping’an was in mortal danger. Yan Shifan and Yan Song were capable of reducing him to ashes with a mere flick of a finger.

What to do?!

“Say... ‘Sorry, Miss, I didn’t mean it,’ or ‘Sorry, I didn’t see anything?’”

Forget it. No words could save him now.

As the girl opened her mouth to scream, Zhu Ping’an quickly spoke first:

“Sorry, sir.”

He bowed, then hiccuped as though drunk.

Sir? The girl thought. I'm clearly a woman... But then, a blush and a hint of delight appeared on her face.

He had mistaken her for a man. With the dim light of the closed room, that was fortunate—her modesty had been preserved.

She adjusted her sash, trying to cover herself, but in doing so revealed a smooth, pale waist and a flat, delicate abdomen. Lower still, the rounded, luminous shoulders and curves shimmered into view.

“Cough, cough... May I ask, sir, where is the Xibi Pavilion?” Zhu Ping’an looked down, unable to meet her eyes. This was the courtyard he had seen on his way to the toilet.

“Turn left out the door!” the girl said, her voice hoarse, trying to sound deep.

“Thank you, sir.”

Zhu Ping’an bowed, then hurried away without pause, his heart pounding. He felt a lucky escape all the way out of the courtyard.

Once he was gone, the girl quickly dressed, patting her chest in relief. That boy is blind... mistaking me for a man!

Suspicious, she stepped out into the courtyard and back to the door, peering inside once more.

He couldn't have missed seeing clearly... the petals in the bath were distinct... something's not right...

Then, a piercing scream tore through the air.