

Rise 328

Chapter 328: Each with Their Own Agenda

After returning to the banquet, Zhu Ping'an's heart kept racing uncontrollably. The scene he had just witnessed had been far too perilous.

Back at the table, no one seemed to notice anything amiss about him. There were only some murmurs about how long he had taken in the dressing room, but after Zhu Ping'an punished himself with a drink, everyone fell silent.

The banquet continued in a cheerful atmosphere, though it wasn't long before word spread that the Second Miss of the Yan family, accompanied by a group of maidservants, had gone to the nearby Ink-Washing Pavilion and searched for a long time. No one seemed to know what she was looking for.

Yan Shifan, slightly tipsy, listening to the commotion from the pavilion, sent someone to ask his younger sister, Yan Lan, what she was doing.

The messenger reported back: a jade hairpin had been stolen from the Second Miss's room, and she was leading her maids in a search at the Ink-Washing Pavilion.

So it had been stolen. With the Yan family's wealth and influence, theft by household servants was not uncommon. Yan Shifan didn't take it to heart. Besides, his little sister had always been headstrong and clever, beloved by their mother. He decided not to interfere and merely sent several servants to stand by for Yan Lan's instructions.

But Zhu Ping'an, sitting in a corner, felt as if he were on pins and needles!

Damn it, that girl really is a lady of the Yan family—and the Second Miss, no less! In ancient times, noble young ladies always had a group of maidservants attending them while bathing, fetching water, handing towels, and so on. But why did the Second Miss of the Yan family bathe without a single maidservant following her? Even if they guarded the door outside, it shouldn't have allowed someone like him to wander in! This girl had been far too careless!

The only good news was that the Second Miss hadn't revealed his accidental intrusion. Instead, she used the theft of the jade hairpin as an excuse to search the Ink-Washing Pavilion. Surely, having someone spy on her while bathing would have been a scandal of the highest order for a young lady of her status; she naturally wouldn't admit it. And in hindsight, it had been wise of him to ask for directions to the pavilion.

Thinking of this, Zhu Ping'an relaxed slightly.

Still, during the banquet, as Ouyang, the young gentleman, spoke grandly of poetry and prose, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help feeling a twinge of guilt. He vaguely felt a green light flicker over Ouyang's head...

The banquet went on, and Zhu Ping'an was gradually plied with more wine. This time, he dared not sneak away to relieve himself; he drank heartily, feeling himself a little tipsy.

By dusk, the Yan family's banquet finally came to an end.

Zhu Ping'an bowed to Yan Shifan and the others and followed the crowd outside. He handed his horse token to the Yan estate's doorman and retrieved his matte-black steed, leading it out of the estate.

The setting sun was blood-red. Zhu Ping'an cast a final glance at the Yan estate from horseback before spurring his horse toward the Linhuai Marquisate.

It seemed that this banquet at the Yan estate had raised his standing at the Linhuai Marquisate even more than when he had passed the imperial examination.

Upon returning to the Linhuai Marquisate, Zhu Ping'an found the household's treatment of him even more deferential than during his examination success. Upon learning he had drunk a good deal of wine, the Marquisate sent someone with a bowl of hangover soup, and several attendants brought a full wooden tub of hot water for him to bathe and change.

Even the furnishings in his guest room had been completely replaced, instantly raising the standard.

Though still dazed from the wine, Zhu Ping'an was unused to being waited on for a bath. After politely thanking the attendants, he sent them off with his gratitude to be conveyed to the household.

Surrounded by the scent of alcohol, Zhu Ping'an stripped and quickly bathed.

Strangely, the bath seemed to deepen his drunkenness. His head spun, his body felt burning hot. After discarding the bathwater, he drank the hangover soup, changed into clean pajamas, and lay down to rest.

Perhaps it was simply the effects of the wine, for the hangover soup seemed powerless for the moment. Zhu Ping'an soon fell asleep.

Meanwhile, in the back courtyard of the Marquisate...

In the courtyard of the Sixth Miss, she stood by the window as her second-class maid, Hong Jian, blushed while carrying a bowl of hangover soup, swaying her slender waist as she left the courtyard. The Sixth Miss's cherry-red lips curved into a small smile as she watched her, her gaze drifting toward the Fifth Miss's courtyard. A strange warmth lifted her mood.

A few days ago, when her Fifth Sister's husband had passed the imperial examination, the curve of the Fifth Miss's smile had kept appearing in the Sixth Miss's mind.

But now... well, her beloved sister could finally hold her head high with pride.

"Go, go, Hong Jian. Don't disappoint me..."

As Hong Jian approached the guest room in the front courtyard, her heart fluttered uncontrollably. At first, the household's maids, including Hong Jian, had not shown much respect for Zhu Ping'an, the future Fifth Master. Rumors about him had been unflattering. Yet, after the recent announcement of the examination

results, almost everyone in the household had updated their opinion of Zhu Ping'an. Now, admiration and envy were unanimous.

He had passed the imperial examination—he was a literary star destined for a high official rank. The Sixth Miss had been told that anyone who passed could enter the court, at least becoming a second-rank official or higher.

Thinking of the servants who had acted so proud just that morning, the Sixth Miss realized how careful even her own Marquis had been. Imagine how influential someone at court would be!

As Hong Jian stepped into Zhu Ping'an's guest room courtyard, her heart nearly leaped out of her chest.

Once inside, she temporarily placed the hangover soup on the stone table and tidied herself. She adjusted her hairpin, retrieved a red paper from her sleeve, dabbed a little on her lips, coloring them slightly.

Then she tugged her collar slightly downward, revealing more of her fair neck.

She had to seize this opportunity.

Her good sister, Xiu'er, had successfully caught the attention of the Second Master and been promoted to concubine. She had far more food, clothing, and comfort than before. Last month, Xiu'er had even flaunted the tortoiseshell ring the Second Master had given her, claiming it was worth hundreds of silver taels.

Inspired by Xiu'er, Hong Jian had thought of attempting the same recently. Her plan had been ready, but an unexpected incident had occurred. Luckily, she had reacted quickly and been well-prepared, or her mistress might have discovered her.

Now, the future Fifth Master was young and promising. Even if he didn't rise to court, he would at least be a second-rank official. How could the old, fat Second Master compare?

This time, she had to seize her chance—once secured, she would have food, clothing, and prestige without worry.

“Master... Zhu Gongzi, I've brought your hangover soup!”

Excited, Hong Jian picked up the bowl, swaying her waist, and called out sweetly as she entered Zhu Ping'an's room.