

Rise 332

Chapter 332: I Understand the Reasoning

When Zhu Ping'an learned that Li Shu had ordered Hongjian—the maid who had tried to climb into his bed—to be stripped of her clothes and punished by kneeling outside the second gate, he couldn't help being a little surprised at her approach. Still, though unexpected, it was something that made sense in this world.

After all, this was the feudal Ming dynasty, not a modern era of freedom, democracy, and equality. In a feudal society, one had to live by feudal rules. Maids were at the very bottom of the hierarchy. It was not unreasonable for one to try to change her fate, and sneaking into the master's bed was one such means—a risky investment with high returns. Yet, as with the stock market, high return meant high risk. If you chose to gamble by climbing into the bed, then you had to be prepared for the consequences.

He understood the reasoning, but still—why strip her bare?!

In this society, forcing a girl to kneel naked before others seemed excessive. A beating or some other severe punishment would have been better. At the very least, she could have left a shred of dignity—a three-point cover, perhaps even a primitive bra.

But then, thinking back on Li Shu's past behavior, such a harsh, humiliating punishment was not out of character for her.

"Still, couldn't you at least leave her a little dignity?" Zhu Ping'an remarked as he looked at Li Shu.

“Such shameless creatures must be stripped completely to learn shame!” Li Shu shot him a glare, her eyes sweeping up and down. “What, are you feeling sorry for her now?”

“Sorry for her? My foot...” Zhu Ping’an curled his lips. Then he suddenly gave Li Shu a two-second stare, imitating her scrutinizing gaze, and smirked. “Or... are you jealous?”

“Jea... jealous?”

Li Shu was caught off guard. Her cheeks flushed crimson, and even the book in her hand trembled. But the next second, her cherry lips pouted, and she rolled her eyes heavily before letting out a mocking laugh like a lark. “Jealous? Ha! Don’t flatter yourself, you stinking toad.”

“Well then, that settles it. How could I possibly pity a girl I’ve never even met?” Zhu Ping’an shrugged and said lightly.

“Who knows what’s going on in your heart?” Li Shu muttered coquettishly.

Forget it—what’s done is done. There was no point in arguing further.

By now it was already past noon, and Hongjian had been handed over to the First Madam for further punishment. Even if Zhu Ping’an had pressed again for Li Shu to have shown a little mercy, it was too late. Once under the First Madam’s control, punishment was inevitable, but at least it probably wouldn’t involve stripping and kneeling.

So Zhu Ping'an let the matter drop. Having lingered in bed long enough, it was time to rise.

"If I may trouble you two to step aside, I need to get up," he said from beneath the covers, bowing slightly with his hands clasped.

"As if anyone wants to watch you," Li Shu teased, then led Hua'er the little maid out of the room.

Once they had gone, Zhu Ping'an lifted the quilt, changed his clothes, and washed up. After rinsing, the last traces of his hangover vanished, and he felt refreshed—like his vitality had been fully restored.

It was well past noon now, and hunger gnawed at him. Just as he was about to head out to find food, Li Shu and Hua'er returned. Hua'er carried a food box in her hands.

"Time to eat, young master!" the little maid said cheerfully, placing the box on the table like it was a treasure.

"My thanks."

Zhu Ping'an clasped his hands toward them in gratitude before opening the box without ceremony. The dishes were light, accompanied by a bowl of rice porridge. Though simple, the flavors were excellent.

“How does it taste?” Li Shu asked with a curious sparkle in her eyes, watching him eat with relish.

“Even plain porridge and vegetables taste this good. Your family’s cook has improved again.”

He cleared the plate of greens, not leaving even a single stalk, then wiped his mouth and raised his thumb in praise.

“Good eye,” Li Shu replied with a pleased smile. “My cook is one of a kind. Others don’t get such fortune.”

After the meal, Li Shu and Hua’er returned to the rear courtyard, saying she wished to see how her aunt would deal with Hongjian.

Full and satisfied, Zhu Ping’an sat at his desk. With the palace examination drawing near, he resumed practicing calligraphy. Unlike the provincial and metropolitan exams, where exam papers were recopied before being graded—making one’s handwriting irrelevant—the palace exam was judged directly from the original script. Thus, handwriting mattered a great deal.

Consistency was key. His calligraphy had long reached a refined level, yet he continued to practice diligently, knowing that to stop would be to regress. Each day’s work, accumulated over time, always brought some progress.

As he wrote, Zhu Ping'an recalled the plaque he had once seen in the Herian Pharmacy, inscribed by Yan Song. Though Yan Song was a notorious traitor, his calligraphy was exquisite—graceful, upright, imbued with a spirit of righteousness.

How strange it was that such a man's writing could exude a grandeur of moral integrity. Perhaps, Zhu Ping'an mused, the old saying that "writing mirrors the man" only reflected the writer's inner state of mind at the time.

It was said that on his deathbed, Yan Song struggled to write fourteen characters: "All my life I served my country with loyalty, let others judge me after death." With that, he cast down his brush and passed away. Perhaps, to the very end, he truly believed himself a loyal and upright minister. That self-righteous conviction might have been what lent his calligraphy its air of righteousness.

At this thought, Zhu Ping'an dipped his brush deeply in ink and wrote the three characters for Herian Hall. The result bore a seven-part resemblance to the plaque he had seen.

Indeed.

Smiling, he continued writing. Five repetitions later, his characters resembled the plaque almost exactly, in both form and spirit.

Unintentionally, he had grasped the knack of imitation—a pleasant surprise.

He burned the sheets he had copied in Yan Song's style, then began afresh. This time, he did not mimic Yan Song's form, but instead sought to infuse his own writing with that same righteous vigor, letting his strokes carry both strength and spirit—like waves breaking forth, yet upright and resolute.

The brush flowed freely, unstoppable, until a servant came to announce that the young masters Zhang Siwei and Wang Shizhen—who had called on him before—were waiting outside. Only then did Zhu Ping'an set his brush down.

After washing his hands and thanking the servant, Zhu Ping'an stepped out. On second thought, he turned back, picked up his duck-shaped purse, tucked it into his robe, and then headed out to meet his guests.