

RISE OF THE POOR

Chapter 7: Entering the Mountains

Entering the mountains was something Zhu Ping'an had dreamed of for a long time. Once back in the east wing, he began pestering Zhu Shouyi to let him go into the mountains with him.

"You think going into the mountains is fun? There are black bears in there that specifically eat children! Don't go!" Chen Shi, standing nearby, deliberately tried to scare Zhu Ping'an to prevent him from going.

This child really didn't give people a moment's peace. Just jumping around in the village was enough to make one anxious, and now he wanted to tag along into the mountains—was he trying to make his mother's life more difficult? Chen Shi increasingly felt that having a son was worse than having a daughter. They were like debt collectors, not only mischievous but also, if they grew up and married, they might forget their mother. She wouldn't even know where to go to grieve.

Zhu Ping'an rolled his eyes at Chen Shi's scare tactics, unable to hold back his disdain.

"That's not true! There are fat rabbits, wild chickens, and delicious fruits in the mountains!" Zhu Ping'an stopped bothering Zhu Shouyi and ran over to hug Chen Shi's leg, trying to cling to her while being annoying.

Zhu Ping'an knew who was in charge at home. His father, despite being big and strong, was completely dominated by Chen Shi; if she didn't speak up, he wouldn't dare to make a sound.

"Did you tell him this?" Chen Shi glared at Zhu Shouyi with her almond-shaped eyes.

Zhu Shouyi turned pale and shook his head repeatedly, afraid to provoke Chen Shi. The last time she got angry, he had to sleep on the ground for over a month and didn't receive a single kind look from her. That month was practically unbearable, and just thinking about it was terrifying.

"You will stay at home tomorrow, and I'll make you something delicious. If you dare to go outside, I'll spank you!" Chen Shi shifted her gaze to Zhu Ping'an, trying to coax and scare him into changing his mind.

If Zhu Ping'an were truly a five-year-old child, he might have obediently given in to Chen Shi's threats. Unfortunately, he was not.

"Mom, I want to go into the mountains with Dad. I want to find delicious food to please you!" Zhu Ping'an held on to Chen Shi's leg, refusing to let go and insisting.

"Enough, stop trying to fool me with that!" Chen Shi snapped, extremely annoyed. This mischievous little boy was just over five years old, yet he wanted to venture into the mountains; even a rabbit could knock him over.

"I want to go into the mountains with Dad!"

Zhu Ping'an fully displayed the stubbornness of a child, ignoring how Chen Shi coaxed or threatened him. He kept repeating that one sentence: "Into the mountains, into the mountains, into the mountains..."

Chen Shi got angry and turned Zhu Ping'an over, pressing him onto her lap, then slapped him on the backside.

"Ouch! I want to go into the mountains!"

Zhu Ping'an cried out after being slapped by Chen Shi but still insisted on wanting to go into the mountains.

Chen Shi looked at her younger son, her teeth clenched in anger. She hadn't even hit him that hard, yet he screamed as if he were being slaughtered. This little rascal! Did he think going into the mountains was a game? Who knew what kinds of strange things were in there?

"Darling, how about letting little Zhi come along? After all, I'll only be on the outskirts of the mountain, not going deep in. It's not dangerous," Zhu Shouyi suggested quietly.

Chen Shi shot him a glare, and Zhu Shouyi immediately lowered his head and fell silent.

However, in the end, under Zhu Ping'an's relentless pestering, Chen Shi finally nodded in agreement for him to go into the mountains, but not without giving him many reminders: don't run around, stay close to your father; don't eat random things, only eat what your father says is okay; don't try to catch rabbits...

Xiahe Village lay at the foot of Woniu Mountain. This Woniu Mountain was not the same as the one at the junction of Beijing and Hebei in modern times, but was generally located in the Anhui and Hubei region, and during the Ming Dynasty, it was in the Huguang provincial administration.

Woniu Mountain, named for its resemblance to a reclining cow, lay horizontally in front of the dense forest, resembling an old giant cow with its neck resting on the southern peaks. The two towering peaks on its head looked like cow horns, and two mountain streams flowed down from its chin, merging into a clear stream that flowed past, gazing at the distant mountain ranges on the opposite side.

Legend has it that during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, Taishang Laojun, also known as Laozi, rode a green ox and dragged a wooden cart out of Hangu Pass to teach and impart knowledge. The old ox, influenced by Laozi, gradually developed spiritual awareness. When Laozi attained immortality, he did not ascend to heaven like the later Han Wudi's Huainan King Liu An, who elevated everyone around him. Instead, Laozi transformed into the Three Pure Ones, ascending alone and leaving behind the old ox, which pursued him tirelessly, like Kuafu chasing the sun. The ox did not rest, striving until it was exhausted, with tears in its eyes as it lay down on the ground, transforming its body into mountains and its tears into streams, merging into a clear creek...

This is the legend of Woniu Mountain, passed down orally by the elders of Xiahe Village.

In the low mountainous areas around Woniu Mountain, three figures—one large and two small—made their way through the rugged terrain. Sunlight filtered through layers of dense leaves, casting mottled shadows on the three of them. The mountain path was uneven and hard to traverse, overgrown with weeds and bushes, scattered with gravel, grass clumps, and fallen leaves, crunching underfoot.

The three were Zhu Ping'an, along with his father Zhu Shouyi and older brother Zhu Pingchuan. Both Zhu Shouyi and Zhu Pingchuan carried large backpacks, and Zhu Shouyi also had a firewood knife strapped to his waist. During the Ming Dynasty, the control over cold weapons was somewhat relaxed; bows, arrows, knives, and crossbows were allowed for civilians, but armor and firearms were strictly regulated. Therefore, Zhu Shouyi carried a firewood knife because his family was not a dedicated hunting family and had no bows or crossbows. Zhu's hunting skills were only sufficient for trapping small animals, and he had no knowledge of archery or shooting.

As for Zhu Ping'an, he carried a small basket. Initially, Zhu Shouyi didn't want him to carry it, but he insisted, so Zhu Shouyi made him a smaller basket overnight. He even told Chen, "Zhu Shouyi, spoil him as much as you want!"

"Zhu Shouyi, listen carefully: if either of the little ones loses a single hair, I'll tear you apart when you return!"

Chen's voice lingered in Zhu Shouyi's ears as he walked ahead, unable to resist turning back to check on the two little ones.

Zhu Ping'an, with his short legs, struggled to keep up with the two men, puffing along behind them and occasionally patting his little legs. Entering the mountains was indeed not something just anyone could manage; the mountain paths were rugged and bumpy, with the forest winding in every direction. Deeper in, the trails disappeared entirely, requiring navigation by memory. Without an experienced hunter, one could easily get lost.

And this was only the periphery of the mountains. In the deep mountains, even experienced old hunters wouldn't dare venture alone, as legends spoke of ferocious tigers lurking there.

"Zhi'er, are you tired? Let me carry you," Zhu Shouyi said, feeling that it was quite a feat for his little son to walk this far. He turned back once more and saw Zhu Ping'an patting his legs, unable to help but speak.

Zhu Ping'an immediately shook his head. "No way! If I let you carry me, Mom will definitely say I can't come to the mountains next time! She'll say, 'Hmph! If

you need to be carried into the mountains, you shouldn't even think about coming back!"

Therefore, for the sake of future trips into the mountains, Zhu Ping'an decisively refused. Moreover, his little arms and legs needed exercise, and this was a perfect opportunity. He had watched "A Bite of China" and saw countless delicious things in the mountains; he couldn't return empty-handed this time, especially not after being carried.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an's firm refusal, Zhu Shouyi was a bit surprised but began to look at him with newfound respect. This kid has potential.

"Second brother, put your basket in my backpack first," said the older brother Zhu Pingchuan, wanting to help lighten Zhu Ping'an's load.

"No need, big brother, I can manage," Zhu Ping'an insisted on independence. Nothing could stop a foodie from entering the mountains, especially since he was hoping to find something that could improve the family's economy.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an's determination, the two gave up. They simply slowed their pace as they walked.