

## Rise 171

### Chapter 171: The Third Brother of the Li Family

Under the supervision of his mother, Chen, Zhu Ping'an spent the entire morning reading. It was only in the afternoon that his mother finally allowed him to go out and return the books to the Li family in Shanghe Village.

As soon as Zhu Ping'an stepped out of the house and had barely walked a short distance, he turned around and saw his mother cheerfully leaving the house with a shoe sole in hand, along with a needle and thread. Judging from the direction she was headed, it was clear that she was going to find a crowded place in the village to show off again.

Sigh, my dear mother...

Watching his mother's joyful figure disappear into the distance, Zhu Ping'an silently made up his mind—this time, he must succeed in the imperial examination and achieve high honors.

After his mother disappeared around the corner, Zhu Ping'an slung his book bag over his shoulder and set off toward Shanghe Village.

"Hehe, I figured Young Master Zhu would be coming soon, and sure enough, I was right. Please, come in, Young Master Zhu."

Before Zhu Ping'an could even knock, Uncle Li, the gatekeeper of the Li family, had already opened the door with a warm and welcoming smile.

Even though he had been addressed as "Young Master Zhu" several times before, Zhu Ping'an still wasn't quite used to it. He smiled wryly and thanked Uncle Li.

From the attitude of the gatekeeper, it was clear that the saying 'All pursuits are inferior, only studying is supreme' was not an empty phrase. Scholars, especially those with official recognition, held a high status in the Ming Dynasty. In fact, during the mid-to-late Ming period, scholars likely had the highest social standing in Chinese history. In the first year of Longqing (1567), the magistrate of Wuxi, Han Jinchuan, was scorned by the public over a certain issue, leading to uproar among the scholars, who even spat on him in protest. That same year, the prefect of Changzhou, Li Youzi, was attacked by scholars from five counties and nearly lost his life.

In such an era, how could one not take studying seriously?

After bidding farewell to Uncle Li, Zhu Ping'an walked straight toward the study, wondering whether the accountants had finished checking the records.

Upon entering, he found the study was quiet—seemingly, the bookkeeping had already been completed. The spacious and well-lit room was empty except for a young servant. The usual steward, Accountant Wang, was nowhere to be seen.

"Young Master Zhu has come to return books."

Zhu Ping'an had never seen this servant before, but the boy recognized him instantly—likely because only the Li family and Zhu Ping'an himself ever had access to the study.

"Yes, thank you." Zhu Ping'an nodded, took the borrowed books out of his bag, and placed them on the table.

"I must trouble you to register the return. I cannot read, and I am only temporarily filling in for Uncle Wang," the servant said apologetically.

"It's no trouble at all. I should be the one apologizing for inconveniencing you." Zhu Ping'an smiled and leaned over to register the returned books in the ledger with a brush.

"Young Master Zhu is truly a kind and generous person." The servant looked grateful and gestured toward the inner study. "Please feel free to browse, sir. I will go and fetch Uncle Wang."

"Much appreciated." Zhu Ping'an cupped his hands in thanks and walked toward the bookshelves to pick out a new book.

As he browsed, he noticed that in just three days, the Li family's collection had grown significantly—an entire new bookshelf had been added. Coincidentally, all the books were related to the imperial examinations. It seemed that Master Li, the wealthy merchant, had specifically purchased them as a gesture of gratitude.

Indeed, successful businessmen are skilled at navigating every aspect of life. Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but admire Master Li's thoroughness.

As he carefully browsed the books, he suddenly heard the sound of approaching footsteps outside the study, accompanied by loud and chaotic voices. In no time, the noise reached the study itself.

"Which one is Zhu Ping'an?"

Immediately after, Zhu Ping'an heard this loud and clear voice.

Come on, I'm the only one in the study, okay? Why use the word "which one," as if there were a bunch of people here?

"May I ask who you are?" Zhu Ping'an stepped out from behind a few bookshelves, cupped his hands, and looked at the visitor.

The person who walked into the study was a young man around seventeen or eighteen years old, with thick eyebrows, big eyes, and a round face. He looked sturdy, like a calf. He wore a dark satin robe with blue embroidered edges featuring hibiscus patterns. A brocade belt was tied around his waist, and he wore short boots with a small decorative mouth.

Clearly a rough and boorish person, yet he was trying to appear refined by holding a folding fan. His large hands and the delicate fan looked completely out of place together.

Behind him, two maidservants and three young servants followed.

When Zhu Ping'an appeared, the young man snorted arrogantly, raised his thick, bear-like hand, and shouted disdainfully, "Who am I? Haha, you come to my house to borrow books and still ask who I am? Others say you're smart, but I don't see it."

This bear-like guy is actually one of the black-bellied girl's brothers?

No wonder she's so tsundere—it must be a family trait! Wait, didn't she once say when we were little that she would have her brother beat me up? She must have been talking about this guy!

"Third Brother, what are you doing here? Who let you into the study? Last time you read a book, you tore it to shreds! Father even forbade you from coming in here!"

At that moment, an annoyed voice came from outside. Soon, the black-bellied girl appeared in the study, dressed in a brand-new, beautiful outfit.

She must have run here, as her little face was flushed.

Behind her, the little maid, Hua'er, was panting heavily from running after her.

Once inside, Hua'er glanced at the Third Young Master, then at Zhu Ping'an, who was standing perfectly fine in front of the bookshelf. Only then did she breathe a sigh of relief.

For some reason, it seemed like her young mistress also let out a relieved sigh.

"Little Sis, why are you here?" The black-bellied girl's Third Brother, who had just been acting all aggressive like a bear, instantly softened into a lazy, sunbathing cat upon seeing his sister.

"I was afraid you'd ruin the study again!" The black-bellied girl pouted.

"Don't worry, after you tattled to Father last time and I got a beating, I wouldn't dare mess around in here again." Third Brother's face was full of flattery.

"Well, you should've studied properly in the first place!" The black-bellied girl huffed.

"Yes, yes, you're just looking out for me, Little Sis." Third Brother grinned widely.

"As long as you know." The black-bellied girl tilted her head at a proud forty-five-degree angle.

Standing by the bookshelf, Zhu Ping'an watched their sibling interaction with boredom. So, this was the black-bellied girl's Third Brother. Now that he looked closely, the thick eyebrows, big eyes, and round face did resemble the rich merchant Master Li. But compared to the black-bellied girl, his looks were far off. She might be willful, manipulative, sharp-tongued, and venomous... but she was undoubtedly the most stunning girl he had seen in both his lives. If he hadn't seen and heard it himself, it would be hard to believe they were siblings.

"I've been home for two days, and I keep hearing my father and my sister say how smart you are. But I don't believe it." After finishing his exchange with his sister, Third Brother turned back to Zhu Ping'an, tilting his nose arrogantly in provocation.

Before Zhu Ping'an could reply, someone else spoke first.

"When have you ever heard me say he's smart?!"

The black-bellied girl stomped her little foot, tiptoed, reached out her delicate hand, and grabbed her Third Brother's ear. Her little tiger teeth were even showing!