

## Rise 26

### Chapter 26: Dabbling in Classes Again

The journey home was smooth and uneventful, and they arrived just in time for dinner. Chen was anxiously waiting at the front gate, and her worries were eased when she saw her son riding in on a swaybacked yellow cow.

At dinner, the main topic was Aunt's animated inquiries about Zhu Pingjun's performance at the private school. She asked whether Jun'er was doing well, if the teacher had praised him, and what he had learned. Zhu Pingjun didn't disappoint her and boasted about his achievements, saying he was performing exceptionally well at the school, getting along with his peers, and that the teacher praised him for his diligent studying. He even mentioned learning four characters, noting how simple they were.

Every time Zhu Pingjun spoke, Aunt's eyebrows danced in delight.

Meanwhile, Zhu Ping'an could only roll his eyes in silence while nibbling on the bread with pickled vegetables. He couldn't help but wonder how First Aunt would feel if she knew that Jun'er had drooled on the table on his first day at school. Of course, he wouldn't be the one to spoil this matter. The teacher had already punished Jun'er, and if Jun'er could recognize his mistakes and change, then he had learned enough from the lesson. If he remained obstinate, saying anything more would be useless, and Aunt would just think he was jealous and trying to undermine Jun'er.

The pickled vegetables at home were all made by Grandmother. Although she had her biases, her pickles were truly exceptional.

Radish sticks and cucumber strips looked as exquisite as jade, fresh and flavorful, with a perfect balance of sweet and sour, crispy and fragrant, leaving one drooling with their unique taste.

Over the past few days, this plate of pickles accompanied Zhu Ping'an with his meals and congee; without them, the food just wouldn't taste as good.

"Zhi'er eats with such appetite," First Aunt remarked, watching Zhu Ping'an crunching loudly as he ate his meal and drank his congee.

"That's why I said letting Zhi'er tend the cows was the right choice," First Aunt continued praising Zhu Pingjun. But she was interrupted by Third Aunt, who was displeased. How could the child from the second brother's family compare to her own? He was just a cowherd digging for food in the dirt, while her child was destined for scholarly success.

Chen's expression soured, but she couldn't explode in anger since Grandmother was watching closely. Instead, she vented her frustration on Zhu Shouyi, pinching him until he winced in pain.

Not to dwell on what everyone did after dinner, let's just say that after the meal, Zhu Ping'an sneakily took a pair of scissors to the cow shed and soon emerged with a small handful of yellow cow tail hair, looking quite pleased with himself.

After returning the scissors to their place, Zhu Ping'an took a bamboo stick the thickness of a finger, bent over, and began stuffing the cow tail hair into the bamboo rod.

This task was tricky; although he managed to get the hair inside, he didn't know how to secure it. Every time he touched it, it either fell out or got sucked back into the bamboo.

"Zhi'er, don't play with the water; it's cold at night. Hurry back to your room and rest," Grandmother said after taking a round in the courtyard and seeing Zhu Ping'an playing in the basin. She mistakenly thought he was just fooling around.

"Got it, Grandmother," Zhu Ping'an replied.

After Grandmother urged him once more, she returned to her room.

Hearing the commotion, Zhu Shouyi came over and saw his youngest son bent over playing with water. He couldn't help but walk over, scooping him up with one arm and carrying him on his shoulder, just like how he would play with him when he was a toddler.

As Zhu Ping'an was focused on the cow tail hair, being suddenly lifted like this caused him to fly up, almost scaring his soul out of him.

Seeing Zhu Ping'an holding a bamboo pole and cow tail hair, Zhu Shouyi couldn't help but ask curiously about his intentions. When he learned that Zhu Ping'an wanted to make a brush, he felt a mix of guilt and amusement. He felt guilty for not being able to support his son's education, yet amused that this foolish child thought he could make a brush himself, as if it were that easy. Since he couldn't provide his son with an education, he decided to make a brush for him to play with.

Having made up his mind, Zhu Shouyi offered to make a brush for Zhu Ping'an.

Zhu Ping'an lifted his little face to look at Zhu Shouyi, somewhat incredulous. How could Zhu Shouyi, who had never been educated, know how to make a brush?

"Your uncle studied when he was young, and we went through a lot of brushes. I often went to the ink and paper shop to buy supplies for your uncle. Over time, I got familiar with the shop assistants and learned how to make brushes myself. It helped save a bit of money for the family. Your uncle is older now, so he doesn't need the brushes I make anymore. But my skills haven't dulled over the years," Zhu Shouyi seemed to reminisce about his childhood with a hint of nostalgia.

In the Ming Dynasty, people typically ate only two meals a day: breakfast and dinner. Breakfast was around eight o'clock, and dinner was around five in the afternoon.

Zhu Ping'an went to herd the cows again after finishing breakfast.

"Hey, why does it look like there's something off with our cow?" Fourth Aunt frowned and muttered to herself as Zhu Ping'an rode out on the old yellow cow.

The cow's tail had been trimmed, so how could it not look strange?

Hearing this, Zhu Ping'an hurriedly guided the old yellow cow out, trying to avoid any trouble if Fourth Aunt found out about the tail.

Today, in addition to what he had from yesterday, Zhu Ping'an brought a small bamboo basket that was narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, a brush, and a piece of wood about the size of A4 paper that had been painted black. This wooden board was found in the kitchen; it might have been part of some furniture, but after the furniture was repaired, this piece had become useless and was thrown into the firewood shed to be burned.

The brush and wooden board were for practicing calligraphy. He filled a bamboo tube with river water, and by dipping the brush in the water, he could practice writing on the black-painted wooden board repeatedly without using ink or paper, thus saving resources.

The small bamboo basket was meant for fishing, a method he had learned from Zhu Shouyi while listening to stories last night.

It was still early, and the sun was just right—not too hot—so Zhu Ping'an rode the yellow cow toward the school. As the cow's hooves clopped over the wooden bridge and climbed the small hill, the grass remained lush, but the little girl from yesterday was nowhere to be seen.

Reaching the riverbank, Zhu Ping'an filled the bamboo tube with river water, then led the old yellow cow to a tree halfway up the slope, tying it there so it could graze on fresh grass. This also allowed the grass that had been eaten by the cow the previous day a chance to recover.

With his makeshift classroom supplies in tow, he passed through the bamboo forest and arrived outside the school. Finding a discreet corner, he settled in to listen to the lessons.

The timing was perfect; the children's early reading had just concluded, and after questioning a few students, the teacher was about to begin a new day of instruction.