

## Rise 291

### Chapter 291: Fatty Zhou

After the rowdy children left, Zhu Ping'an tidied up the mess they had made of the table. He gently caught the innocent toad in his hand and walked outside, placing it in the flowerbed, then loosely covered it with soil.

All right, go back to hibernating.

After that, he returned to the room, laid out his brush, ink, paper, and inkstone, and resumed practicing calligraphy. This time, there were no noisy children to disturb him. He practiced peacefully until a young maid ran in to inform him that the marquis's residence was preparing a banquet for the evening. So, Zhu Ping'an put away his writing tools and followed the maid to the front hall where the banquet was to be held.

He turned left and right, passed through winding corridors, and crossed several doors before arriving at the banquet area.

It was a drawing room. Directly opposite the entrance stood a zitan wood screen carved with pine and crane patterns, inlaid with jade. On either side were curved-leg side tables holding large porcelain vases and marble plaques—five or six pieces in total. The room's furnishings were luxurious and elaborately carved, inlaid with marble, gemstones, and enamel. Though beautiful, the display exuded a strong air of ostentation and flaunting of wealth.

At the center of the room hung a large calligraphy scroll with a couplet. It read:

“Plain clothes and simple meals, some good tea, this blessing I have enjoyed in old age!

Managing the household, governing the state, and bringing peace to the world—leave such matters to Cao Ren.”

Plain meals and tea? It’s already this extravagant.

This couplet must have been left by their ancestor who followed Zhu Yuanzhang in founding the nation. But just looking at the decor here, it’s clear that the ancestor’s words were left in vain.

Upon entering the drawing room, Zhu Ping’an noticed that everyone else had already taken their seats. Most of them were women. Sitting in the center was an elderly woman with silver hair, appearing to be in her sixties. The others gathered around her like stars surrounding the moon.

The marquis’s second, third, fourth, and sixth daughters were all seated around the old lady. Li Shu sat a little further away.

In the old matron’s arms was a little girl, sucking on her chubby finger while staring at Zhu Ping’an. At the old lady’s feet leaned a mischievous boy, who looked toward the entrance and shot Zhu Ping’an a provocative glare.

As soon as Zhu Ping’an entered, everyone turned to look at him.

“Hey, who’s this big brother? Is he the one we’ve been waiting for? Why is he only just arriving? Niuniu’s tummy is already hungry,” said the little girl in the old lady’s arms, sucking her pudgy finger and clutching her belly cutely as she looked at Zhu Ping’an.

“Exactly. Making us wait so long, and still not as well-mannered as me and my sister,” the boy at the old lady’s feet said challengingly, glaring at Zhu Ping’an.

At that, the old lady’s already displeased expression became even more sour.

The marquis’s sixth daughter covered her mouth and let out a soft laugh. Her gaze toward Zhu Ping’an was full of gloating amusement.

I see now.

That little maid earlier must have been ordered by one of these girls to delay calling him on purpose. Interesting. Clearly, there are quite a few people in this marquis household who don’t like me.

“I am late. I truly feel ashamed.”

Zhu Ping'an bowed and apologized to everyone, openly admitting his tardiness without dragging the maid into it. Since they had come prepared, they wouldn't have left any evidence. It was better to admit fault straightforwardly.

"Enough, enough. Take your seat."

The old lady in the center waved her hand stiffly, signaling Zhu Ping'an to sit. A maid responded and led Zhu Ping'an to a separate table.

According to ancient etiquette: At the age of seven, boys and girls must sit separately and use different dining utensils. Even children over seven mustn't sit at the same table with the opposite sex. In the marquis's household, such customs were strictly followed.

The old lady and her daughters sat at one table, while Zhu Ping'an sat alone at another, with no one accompanying him. Clearly, the marquis's household didn't place much importance on him. Zhu Ping'an was even more certain of this after sitting down.

The dishes were served one after another with extravagant presentation. Even though Zhu Ping'an sat alone, more than ten dishes were brought to his table. The old lady's table, of course, had even more.

"Great-grandmother, I made it in time for dinner!"

A voice from the door rang out—a boy's voice still cracking with puberty. A familiar chubby figure jogged in.

Zhu Ping'an recognized him. He had been the last of the noble brats who had charged into the city on horseback at the gate that day, and also the same weirdo who, while queuing for the imperial exam, kissed every one of his belongings for good luck.

People had called him Fatty Zhou or Young Master Zhou, so Zhu Ping'an had assumed his surname was Zhou. Turns out he was actually surnamed Li—his given name must end in "Zhou."

This guy wasn't even the same type as chubby Xue Chi. This one was the quintessential spoiled second-generation heir, exuding idiocy from head to toe.

But this fatty was the old matron's favorite among her grandchildren. The moment he entered, she was all smiles, her eyes crinkling with joy.

"You little monkey, always showing up when there's food!" the old lady said joyfully, beckoning him over. Then she asked with concern, "Why didn't you sleep a bit longer? You were in the exam hall for nine days and seven nights—I was so worried. You went straight to sleep when you got home, and I didn't even ask—how did you do in the exam?"

The fatty puffed up proudly and said, "Great-grandmother, don't worry. I've got this exam in the bag!"

At his own table, Zhu Ping'an couldn't help but think, You mean you kissed your way through it.

Li Shu, sitting at the table, rolled her eyes. She'd long heard that her cousin from her uncle's side was completely unreliable—like a pig since childhood: lazy, dumb, gluttonous, and conceited. Who knew how much effort her uncle had spent just to get him eligible for the exam. And now he dared to claim he'd pass easily? Laughable. If Zhu Ping'an said that, maybe she'd believe it. But you?

“Good, good! I knew my little monkey had promise,” the old lady beamed. “It wasn't in vain that your mother went to the temple to pray for you.”

“Eh? Who are you?”

The fatty had just walked in and was about to join the old lady's table when he suddenly spotted Zhu Ping'an and stopped, his pudgy face scrunching in curiosity.

Before Zhu Ping'an could reply, the brat by the old lady's feet rushed over, hugged the fatty's leg, and pointed at Zhu Ping'an.

“He's a bumpkin here to take advantage of us!”

The brat squinted his little eyes at Zhu Ping'an, sparks of animosity in them.

At those words, Fatty Zhou's gaze toward Zhu Ping'an turned full of disdain. A bumpkin? So, a low-born peasant! Trying to take advantage of our Linhuai Marquis household?!

"Rui'er, mind your words. That's your future fifth brother-in-law," said the marquis's sixth daughter with a laugh, covering her mouth.

Aside from Li Shu and her maid behind her, no one seemed intent on correcting the boy's rude address of Zhu Ping'an. On the contrary, they looked like they were enjoying the show.

"I don't want a bumpkin as my fifth brother-in-law! I want my cousin from grandmother's side to be my fifth brother-in-law, not this bumpkin!"

The brat shouted, clearly upset, glaring at Zhu Ping'an.

"Ahem... kids say the darndest things... Rui'er, come here, to your sister," the marquis's second daughter said, coughing lightly into her embroidered handkerchief as she tried to smooth things over.