

## Rise 296

### Chapter 296: Checking Homework

The warm breeze brushed against the window, birds chirped and flowers bloomed — and the bear kid's recitation echoed especially loud.

Zhu Ping'an sat across from the bear kid, quietly and leisurely writing ceremonial prose with a brush on rice paper, while listening to the bear kid's mournful, resentful tone. For some reason, seeing the chubby, tormented face of the bear kid sparked an unusual flow of literary inspiration:

"We humbly report on this year's gracious examination. We reverently unite in sincerity, appealing to Heaven's scrutiny. Blessed with imperial grace, we drink the essence of the western winds, savor the glow of the eastern mountains — such wonders unseen till now, year upon year without end. Auspicious signs rise across the four seas; the North Star shines with the moon's blessing. The east wind blows strong, the west wind brings fortune. This unified land is governed solely by our divine emperor."

By the time Zhu Ping'an had finished his third ceremonial prose, a young servant came running over to report that the Marquis had returned, and that the bear kid was to greet him in the front courtyard. The Marquis — the eldest master of the main household — had inherited the title of Marquis of Linhuai after the old Marquis passed away. He had gone out on official business some days ago and had just returned.

Upon hearing his father was back, the bear kid's chubby face twisted in fear. He feared neither Heaven nor Earth — but he feared his father.

However, remembering that he had memorized all his lessons this time, the bear kid's face returned to normal. He even started thinking: if Father is pleased with his studies today, what reward should he ask for? Then, he looked at Zhu Ping'an sitting across from him and thought: hmm, I'll ask Father to kick this country bumpkin out.

"What's wrong? Scared?" Zhu Ping'an asked with a smile, curling his lips as he looked at the bear kid.

"Who's scared? Hmph! I've memorized it backwards and forwards. Unlike you, you dumb country bumpkin — you even got the words wrong! Hmph!"

The bear kid puffed up with arrogance, turned his fat face away with a "hmph," and stomped outside on his short, chunky legs — only to nearly trip over the doorstep from lifting his chin too high and not watching where he was going.

"Oh. Then don't mess up like I did during recitation," Zhu Ping'an kindly reminded, lips still curled in amusement, watching the bear kid leave.

"Hmph, I'm nothing like you, bumpkin!" the bear kid snapped back, tossing his chubby face over his shoulder in defiance, then marched proudly toward the front courtyard.

No one in the Marquis' residence had invited Zhu Ping'an to the front courtyard, so he didn't bother going to join the crowd. He tidied up the desk and returned to his guest room. On the way, Zhu Ping'an noticed the residence was much busier than the day before — maids and servants bustling everywhere. It seemed that the madams who had gone to the temple to pray had also returned.

Amid all this busyness, even as they bustled by, the maids and servants didn't forget to shoot Zhu Ping'an a disdainful glare. Every day in the residence brought new rumors about Zhu Ping'an's supposed flaws — it would be a miracle if anyone still had a good impression of him.

By the time Zhu Ping'an reached his room, the bear kid had already entered the front courtyard.

The front courtyard was lively. The eldest master had returned from his official trip, and the madams who went to pray at the temple had returned too. The young ladies of the house, including Li Shu, had all gathered there.

Li Shu paid her respects to her uncle, aunt, and second aunt. After a few superficial pleasantries, she took her little maid and sat off to the side, raising an eyebrow as she watched the seemingly harmonious chatter among her large extended family.

The Marquis — the eldest master — had quite distinctive features. To put it bluntly, he was fat. He somewhat resembled Li Shu's father, but was even fatter, to the point where just walking made it seem like he'd start wheezing. His plump face carried three strands of beard, seemingly in an attempt to look refined and scholarly — but it was like drawing a tiger and ending up with a cat. He looked more like a potato with three whiskers.

Generally, fat people seem more amiable, but the Marquis' face had a stern air to it, creating an unapproachable aura. He wore a square ceremonial cap and a wide, heavily tailored Confucian robe, cinched at the waist with a jade belt.

“Gong’er’s here! Come, let Mother take a look at you,” a delighted voice called out as the bear kid, Li Yian Gong, stepped in. It was the main madam of the house — the Marquis’ wife. She was well-preserved for a woman in her forties, looking like she was only in her thirties. She had the dignified aura of a matron in charge — adorned with dazzling jewels in her hair and wearing an ornate pleated skirt made from the finest southern silk.

However, compared to the two concubines clinging attentively to the Marquis, she was still outshined — they had youth and beauty on their side.

Those two concubines had accompanied the Marquis on his trip. Officially, they were there to serve him, but in truth, they were there to warm his bed and accompany him on his outings.

“Mommy~~~” the bear kid cried joyfully, rushing into the main madam’s arms and showering her with affection.

At the sight, the second concubine — standing beside the Marquis — subtly clenched the handkerchief in her hand.

Li Yian Gong was her biological son, but he had been taken and raised by the main madam from birth. His name was recorded under her branch in the family registry. This was a secret within the residence, sealed by the Marquis himself. The main madam took it very seriously — anyone caught spreading rumors had been sold off. Still, secrets like this always leak, and many in the residence knew the truth.

Her own biological son had to call her “Concubine,” while calling that woman “Mother”!

Whenever the second concubine saw the main madam doting on the bear kid, she felt like she was choking on a bone. But the main madam loved to rub it in — she'd often show off her affection for the boy right in front of the second concubine, constantly outdoing herself with new and creative ways to display their bond — just like now.

"A doting mother raises a spoiled child! Gong'er, come — let Father see how your studies are going," the Marquis said sternly, face tight.

"Why are you shouting? Can't you speak more gently?" the main madam said softly, still holding the bear kid.

"What do you women know? Gong'er, come here." The Marquis glared and barked at the bear kid.

Under his father's glare, the bear kid reluctantly waddled forward on his stubby legs.

"How are your studies?" the Marquis asked, looking down at him.

"I've memorized everything," the bear kid lifted his chubby face proudly.

It was rare to see the bear kid so confident about his studies, and the Marquis was both surprised and secretly pleased. His eldest son was off taking the imperial exams, and now this younger one was showing signs of promise too. The House of Li might flourish again!

Still, the Marquis kept his satisfaction hidden, lest the child grow arrogant.

“All memorized? You know the consequences of lying!” the Marquis’ eyes narrowed. “Then recite Ode to the Tortoise’s Longevity for me.”

The bear kid had been full of confidence, but at those words — and the Marquis’ stern gaze — his knees went weak. That warning about the consequences of lying brought back terrifying memories of past punishments. His mind went blank. Ode to the Tortoise’s Longevity — how did it go again?

“Recite it!”

The Marquis shouted again at that critical moment.

Startled, the bear kid instinctively blurted out:

“Though the divine tortoise is thin,

There's still some meat on it.

First we boil it into soup,

Then we gnaw on the meat.”

His voice was clear, the pronunciation crisp, and the rhythm oddly catchy. His voice rang out through the entire room.

Silence fell.

Seconds later — the Marquis' furious roar erupted, spraying a gust of air that made a tuft of the bear kid's hair fly up.

If not for the main madam's quick reflexes in pulling the child into her arms, the Marquis would've surely bent him over his knee for a thorough spanking.

“Why are you so angry? He's just a child,” the main madam tried to soothe him.

“What do you know? That nonsense he just recited — if outsiders heard that, wouldn’t they laugh at me, Li Tingzhu, for raising a fool? Where would I put my face?” the Marquis roared, smoke practically pouring from his ears.

“Don’t shout. That wasn’t the only poem — he’ll definitely get the next one right,” the main madam said, giving both of them a way out. She squeezed the bear kid’s palm, hinting for him to take the opportunity.

“Uh... that last one didn’t count. I can do the next one,” the bear kid replied, not very confidently.

“Then recite Returning to My Hometown,” the Marquis said, calming slightly — though still looking grim.

“When young, I left home and now return old,”

“My accent unchanged, though my hair’s turned gray.”

The bear kid recited fluently, without a single mistake.

“See? Didn’t Gong’er recite that very well?” the main madam said, trying to smooth things over.

“Why are you interrupting again? Gong’er, continue reciting,” the Marquis snapped, glaring at her, then turned back to the bear kid with a cold face.

What a terrifying face!

The bear kid flinched, startled again, and reflexively blurted:

“When young, I left home and now return old,”

“My accent unchanged, though my hair’s turned gray.”

“Children see me but do not recognize,”

“And laughing ask, ‘Fatty, who are you?’”

“Fatty, who are you?” FAT-TY. This line stabbed right at the Marquis’ sore spot — he was very fat, but absolutely hated being called fat.

And now: Fatty, who are you — and laughing, no less!

Silence.

Seconds later—

“I’M YOUR DAMN FATHER!!”

The Marquis’ furious bellow shook the room, followed by the sound of slaps and the bear kid’s pig-like wails.

“It’s all that bumpkin’s fault!” the bear kid howled while being spanked.

“You’re still making excuses?!” the Marquis roared again, raising his hand once more. “What bumpkin? You’re blaming someone else now? You had over half a month to learn this! And all you’ve learned is how to shift the blame?!”

Thus, the bear kid’s wailing echoed even farther through the residence.

