

## Rise 306

### Chapter 306: The Naughty Child Returns

The setting sun was reluctant to leave the sky, clinging sentimentally to the western mountains, dyeing the heavens with a wash of red clouds. The north wind gradually picked up, like a sulky little girl throwing a tantrum, lashing out at everything in the streets and acting willfully.

A boy was walking down West City's Gonghou Street, leading a horse. The howling wind blew aside a tuft of the horse's side-parted mane. The horse already looked like a loser among its kind, yet it still held its head high with an air of self-satisfaction. As a result, the side-parted mane was blown to cover half its face, making its already cringe-worthy appearance even more exaggerated.

"Tone it down a bit."

When they reached the gate of the Marquis of Linhuai's residence, the boy stretched lazily in the wind, patted the black horse's head, and said softly.

The black horse twisted its head after being patted, nostrils flaring upward as if slightly irritated—its arrogance was off the charts.

"Young Master, you're back."

The gatekeeper on duty at the Marquis of Linhuai's residence saw the boy approaching, recognized him, and came forward to open the side gate, offering a brief greeting. Although this young man could be considered one of the masters of the residence, the gatekeeper showed little respect. He was simply a bit surprised—surprised that this master had left empty-handed but returned with such a shabby-looking horse. Truly a bumpkin from the countryside, actually spending money on a workhorse fit only for plowing fields.

There were too many rumors floating around the residence about this particular master: sold himself into the family, relied on the Marquis's influence just to pass the provincial exam—why else would he have ranked dead last on the list? He wasn't even good-looking and lived off a woman. Stories like these were a dime a dozen, and the gatekeeper heard several versions daily. So naturally, he couldn't bring himself to show much respect; he was just doing his job.

"Mm, thanks."

The boy nodded and smiled slightly, then led the emo black horse through the side gate into the residence, heading familiarly to the stables. At the entrance, he handed the horse over to a stable hand, who then led it into the stables.

From a distance, the stables housed several tall, strong horses. Upon entering, the black horse seemed quite excited. It stretched out its face to flirt with a majestic mare across the rail. But the mare completely ignored it. Still, the black horse wasn't discouraged in the slightest, looking utterly pleased with itself, its side-parted mane flapping as it busily tried to socialize.

Well, looks like this guy isn't planning to leave anytime soon.

The boy shook his head and smiled, then turned and walked toward the guest rooms of the residence. The guest rooms weren't far from the stables—just a short path through two courtyards and around a rock garden. He soon arrived at the guest quarters.

Before he could step into the courtyard where he was staying, he heard voices inside—one was a little girl, the other the bratty voice of a young boy. They seemed to be up to some kind of mischief in the yard.

“Is it ready, Sister Niu’er?” the bratty voice rang out.

“Don’t rush, let me throw a few more books to vent Brother Rui’s anger,” the little girl replied casually.

“You’re the best, Sister Niu’er. It’s all that bumpkin’s fault—I got punished because of him. Even a skinny turtle has some meat! And then that fat guy who asked, ‘Who are you?’—he made Dad beat my butt raw!” the brat complained.

“Silly Brother Rui. Daddy hates it when people call him fat,” the little girl said, dragging out her words.

“It’s all the bumpkin’s fault. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have gotten it wrong,” the boy kept whining.

“Okay, let’s run. That bumpkin is coming back!” the little girl’s voice came from the room.

Then came the sound of little feet running, and next, a cute four-year-old girl dashed out of the courtyard gate and bumped right into the boy, who caught her in one arm.

“Bump—Brother-in-law, hello!”

The little girl, now in the boy’s arms, looked up at him. Her mouth had almost blurted out “bumpkin,” but she quickly corrected herself. Her black eyes looked at the boy sweetly, and she greeted him cheerfully and innocently, her smile pure and utterly adorable.

“What’s wrong, Sister Niu’er?”

The bratty boy came hobbling toward the gate, limping a bit from a spanking. Hearing the little girl’s exclamation, he hurried over.

It seemed the boy had been punished and sent outside to cool off, leaving the little girl inside to cause trouble.

“Ah? Bumpkin, why are you back? What do you want? Let my sister Niu’er go, now!” The brat’s fat little face twitched when he saw the boy, then puffed up as he barked at him like a bulldog.

“Oh, so your name is Niu’er?” the boy said softly, looking down at the little girl in his arms.

“Mm-hmm! Brother-in-law is so smart! My nickname is Niuniu,” she replied, nodding her little head hard, smiling brightly.

“Bumpkin, did you hear me? Let go of Sister Niu’er!” the brat barked again, still posturing like a little bulldog.

“Let me see what you two did.”

The boy paid the brat’s threats no mind, simply carried the little girl into the courtyard and toward the room. The brat, to his credit, didn’t run off but followed, still puffed up and defiant.

The boy walked into the room carrying the little girl and immediately noticed that a few of his books, usually left on the desk, were missing. There was even a small footprint on the chair—clearly used to climb up and snatch the books. Judging by the size of the footprint, it was clearly the little girl in his arms.

“Bumpkin! Let her go or else—don’t blame me for being rude!” The brat saw the boy staring at the desk and realized their mischief had been discovered. He tried to intimidate him like he usually did with the servants.

Bumpkin, let go of Sister Niu’er!

After dinner, the second young lady of the residence and her companions happened to pass by on their way to the rear courtyard and heard the brat's angry shout. Their expressions changed, fearing something indecent was happening inside. They immediately turned and entered the courtyard with their maids and attendants.

Li Shu also entered the courtyard with her maid Baozi, but unlike the others, she looked amused, a faint smile on her lovely face.

Since the door was open, everyone saw what was happening inside at a glance.

The boy was standing calmly in front of the desk, holding the little girl in one arm. Nothing inappropriate—just an ordinary hold. The brat stood in front of him, face puffed up like a bulldog.

“You took my books?” the boy asked, holding the little girl.

“No,” they both answered.

“You really didn't?” he asked again.

Still in unison: "We really didn't."

"How many did you take?" the boy asked with a smirk.

"Five," the brat blurted.

The little girl in his arms rolled her eyes at that answer. She didn't fear a clever opponent, but she feared having a pig-headed teammate. The boy had led them right into a trap.

Everyone in the room knew who they were. The boy was Zhu Ping'an. The little girl was Niuniu, from his second uncle's family. The brat was Li Yangong.

From the second young lady's perspective, the exchange went like this:

Zhu Ping'an: "You took my books?"

Naughty Child: "We really didn't."

Zhu Ping'an: "How many did you take?"

Naughty Child: "Five."

Zhu Ping'an: "Did you throw them away?"

Naughty Child: "We really didn't throw them away."

Zhu Ping'an: "Where did you throw them?"

Naughty Child: "In the latrine pit."

The second young lady and the others were utterly speechless