

## Rise 315

### Chapter 315: A Candidate of Divine Descent, What Should Be Done?

The red sun had already risen three zhang high, and golden incense burners were being filled one by one.

In the early morning, the Marquis of Linhuai's residence shimmered with resplendent brilliance under the sunlight. Red lanterns, green potted plants, intricately embroidered screens, phoenix-shaped incense burners emitting fragrant smoke—countless rare and exquisite objects were on full display, transforming the marquis's mansion into a dazzling spectacle.

The maids and servant girls of the marquis's household had all gotten up early to wash and dress. They put on the new clothes bestowed upon them by their masters and adorned themselves with gifted jewelry, dressing up beautifully and bustling about.

Today was the 60th birthday celebration of the old lady of the Marquis of Linhuai's household. The maids and young servants were up early to sweep and clean, assist their masters with washing, and, under the supervision of the stewards, tidy up the mansion and prepare all the necessities for the birthday celebration.

Zhu Ping'an got up and washed as usual. He changed into the new clothes the bun-carrying little maid had brought him yesterday: an ink-colored robe, white deerskin boots, and his hair tied simply. Although his appearance was ordinary, the clothes lent him a faint air of nobility.

However, he was still far inferior compared to Young Master Zheng.

Young Master Zheng stood with hands behind his back at the entrance to Zhu Ping'an's courtyard, dressed in brocade and jade accessories. His sleeves fluttered in the wind, and he held a bone fan behind his back. He looked extremely elegant and handsome, like a picture of refined grace. His entire bearing exuded noble aura and grandeur.

"Today is the old madam's birthday banquet, with countless distinguished guests attending. You have neither literary talent nor useful skills. Don't disgrace the marquis's household. When we go out later, I advise you to quietly stay in a corner so you won't embarrass cousin Shu'er either."

With these words, Young Master Zheng, still standing with hands behind his back, turned and left, his solitary figure exuding the melancholy of a lonely master.

Striking a pose in front of my door early in the morning, just to say this one sentence? That walking posture, with the trembling leg—he must have pulled a muscle from posing too long! Alright, just for the effort. I'll give you 80 points for acting cool. Zhu Ping'an smiled as he watched Young Master Zheng walk away, his leg still twitching.

When Zhu Ping'an reached the front courtyard, he found that, sure enough, he had been arranged into a corner, and no one paid him any attention.

The marquis's residence had prepared several courtyards and the main hall as reception areas. Dozens of banquet tables were set up, but Zhu Ping'an's table stood all alone in a remote corner—so inconspicuous that it was barely noticeable unless one looked carefully.

Early that morning, the second master of the household—who had been absent for days or even half a month doing who-knows-what—returned to the marquis's residence with a heavy scent of makeup on him, timing his arrival precisely. He went straight to the old madam's courtyard to pay his respects.

As the birthday celebrant, the old madam's room was richly decorated in the theme of longevity. A painting of the goddess Magu offering birthday blessings was standard, and on the window-side table sat a white jade carving of the immortal old man offering a peach of immortality. The smiling elder held a peach in his hand, exquisitely lifelike. Naturally, a large "shòu" (longevity) character, written in an immortal, free-flowing style, adorned the room.

The floor was covered in a crimson carpet embroidered with a large "shòu" character. In the center of the room stood a redwood table, atop which burned an incense burner, flanked by two red candles as thick as a child's wrist, each engraved with the character for longevity.

The room was filled with longevity symbolism—everywhere you looked, longevity was celebrated.

The old madam sat upright in her bright red birthday gown, letting a servant girl tend to her hair.

"Your son greets you, Mother."

The second master entered the room and knelt with a cheerful smile to pay his respects.

"You unfilial brat, you still remember your home? What kind of respect is that? Even if you paid it, your presence alone ruins the peace!"

Upon seeing her second son enter, the old madam waved her hand to have the servant girl move aside and scolded him, pretending to strike him with her jade ruyi scepter.

“Mother, you’ve wronged your son. I haven’t been misbehaving lately. I’ve actually been at a most efficacious temple, bathing and fasting, kneeling beneath the Bodhisattva, chanting scriptures. I even asked a Zen master for the ‘Sutra for Longevity and Long Life’—believers say it’s the most effective. Just last night I chanted it several more times. I only stopped so I could hurry back for your birthday. If beating your son will ease your anger, I’m happy to be beaten every day.”

The second master knew the old madam wouldn’t really hit him, so he cheerfully leaned his head forward, looking aggrieved yet willing to take a beating.

“A grown man like you, acting shamelessly. If it weren’t for guests today, you’d be getting a good thrashing.” The old madam scolded with a smile.

“No need for Mother to do it herself. Just say the word, and your son will take care of it. I promise you’ll be satisfied.” The second master grinned.

“You’re incorrigible. I’ll deal with you another day.” The old madam scolded, laughing.

“May you smile always, remain ever cheerful, healthy and radiant. Your son offers birthday wishes—may the honored elder have blessings as vast as the Eastern Sea, brightness like the sun and moon, longevity like the pine and crane, eternal youth, and a lifespan as enduring as the Southern Mountain.”

Kneeling, the second master took a small silver teapot from a maid, poured a cup of tea, and cheerfully offered it to the old madam.

“Alright, alright. Now go help your older brother in the front courtyard. Don’t make more trouble.” The old madam accepted the tea and took a light sip.

“Your son takes his leave.”

The second master bowed, turned, and left the room. Just before exiting, he sneakily groped the hip of the young maid lifting the curtain.

The maid blushed furiously, her heart fluttering as she nodded to him—as if something had been arranged.

Not long after the second master departed, the second young lady of the marquis’s house led Li Shu and the other young noblewomen, along with chubby Zhou and the mischievous little girl, into the room. In order, they all knelt in a line to offer birthday wishes to the old madam, giggling all the while.

While the marquis's household members were taking turns kneeling to offer birthday greetings to the old madam, a fair-faced, beardless young eunuch arrived once again at the southeast gate of the capital's Shuntian Imperial Examination Hall. Escorted by several Jinyiwei guards on horseback, he delivered a sealed envelope to the examiners, including Xu Jie.

Only after Xu Jie and the others unsealed the envelope in front of the young eunuch and verified its integrity did the eunuch take his leave, escorted away by the Jinyiwei.

When Xu Jie and the other examiners opened the seal, they found inside the draft ranking list submitted for imperial review and copies of the top candidate's examination papers. Additionally, there was a single slip of paper.

"A candidate of divine descent, what should be done?"

The paper had only this simple six-character line—nothing else. Not even a single ink dot of imperial instruction was left on the draft ranking.

This was Emperor Jiajing's unique method of managing his officials. The words on the paper were a secret code—Jiajing loved to use such cryptic methods to control his ministers. One must admit, Emperor Jiajing had exceptional political skill. He had perfected the art of imperial manipulation, and this kind of cryptic note was a perfect tool for covertly exercising power. Of course, this was only one of Jiajing's many political techniques. Still, his use of coded notes was one of the most iconic.

The wording on such notes was highly irregular, entirely based on the emperor's whims. Yet they conveyed the emperor's intentions. If you couldn't understand what the note meant, how could your service please the emperor? If he was displeased, you could forget about promotion—be glad if you weren't punished. Thus, during the Jiajing era of the Ming Dynasty, understanding these cryptic notes was a mandatory skill for officials.

Among those most adept in this art was Yan Song. He thoroughly understood Jiajing's coded language. It's said, however, that the best at deciphering these notes was Yan's son, Yan Shifan. Reportedly, some codes that even Yan Song couldn't decipher, his son could interpret word for word. That's how Yan Song managed to retain his position as Chief Grand Secretary.

"A candidate of divine descent, what should be done?"

'降' (jiàng) here meant "to descend" or "to appear"—that is, the appearance of an extraordinary talent. The apparent meaning was: A brilliant talent has appeared—what should be done?

But isn't the whole purpose of the imperial examination to select talent?

Yan Maoqing and the others stared at the note, pondering it repeatedly but baffled—what did His Majesty mean?

Xu Jie, however, read the note and smiled knowingly. He was no slouch when it came to deciphering codes.

These six words weren't asking how to select talent, but how to rank the paper titled "A candidate of divine descent." In other words, where should this particular paper be placed in the final rankings?

Why phrase it like this?

Well, wasn't the emperor's meaning perfectly clear?