

Rise 338

Chapter 338: The Palace Examination Begins a Day in Advance (2)

By midmorning, the sun had already climbed high into the sky, its warmth spreading gently across the city. Rays of golden light poured down like streams of molten metal, gilding the streets and rooftops of the capital. Outside the gates of the Marquis of Linhuai's residence, a grand sedan chair borne by four sturdy men came to a halt. The sedan was no ordinary conveyance: its silver-topped canopy gleamed in the sunlight, while the draped curtains were embroidered in shimmering golden thread with a single bold character—"Yan".

Zhu Ping'an followed the steward out of the residence, and the moment his eyes fell upon the sedan chair, he could not help but be stunned. This was a conveyance reserved only for high-ranking officials of the third grade—an honor far beyond the reach of a mere scholar with no official position like himself. Why on earth would Yan Shifan, the cunning and feared son of the all-powerful Yan Song, send such a sedan to fetch him?

His heart tightened. Could this be a trap? Even the craftiest plots rarely flaunted themselves so openly. Would someone as intelligent as Yan Shifan really resort to such a clumsy, blatant scheme? The thought sent an involuntary shiver down Zhu Ping'an's spine.

The steward, seeing the doubt flicker across Zhu Ping'an's face, immediately stepped forward, bowing respectfully. "Gongzi, please, do get in. Tomorrow is the palace examination. Our master feared that fatigue might dull your performance, so he sent his own sedan chair to ensure your comfort." With that, the steward lifted the curtain with both hands, half-bowing, inviting him inside.

Zhu Ping'an hesitated, his mind racing. But then he thought: Soldiers will block the enemy; water will be stopped by earth. Whatever scheme lies ahead, I will face it when it comes. Besides, he had never ridden in a four-man sedan before—why not enjoy this one small luxury?

Smiling faintly, he cupped his hands in thanks, bent at the waist, and stepped inside. At the steward's signal, four brawny porters bent their knees and lifted the sedan with practiced ease. Slowly, steadily, they carried him eastward.

Inside the swaying sedan, Zhu Ping'an slipped a hand into his sleeve and drew out a white jade hairpin. This was a guan-zan—a crown pin used to secure the hair when donning ceremonial headwear. Since coming to this era, he had long since adapted to its customs in dress and hairstyle. He had purchased the pin during a stroll through the capital with Zhang Siwei and the others.

The pin was silver-inlaid jade, the white stone carved into the shape of a roaring tiger, its open jaws biting down on a slender silver shaft. Though the shop had displayed more luxurious gold-inlaid versions, Zhu Ping'an had chosen this one simply because it was cheaper.

Yet today, its silver was precisely why he carried it. Countless dramas and tales spoke of silver detecting poison, darkening upon contact with deadly toxins. Perhaps not all venoms could be detected so, but surely most could. And if Yan Shifan was indeed setting a trap, it would be sheer folly to dismiss the possibility of poison. Forewarned is forearmed, he reminded himself, gripping the pin tightly.

The ride itself was far from comfortable. The sedan jolted and swayed with every step of the bearers. Compared to the saddle of a horse, this was almost nauseating—certainly no match for the smooth carriages of his own time. Nor was it particularly fast. After all, men carried it on their shoulders; how swift could they possibly be? Zhu Ping'an mused that the only real reasons for using a sedan must be to spare one's legs, and to savor the smug superiority of privilege.

Time dragged on. Nearly an hour passed, yet they still had not arrived. Bored, Zhu Ping'an closed his eyes and silently reviewed the policy essays he had studied, replaying in his mind the emperor's exam topics and the historical precedents that might serve as answers. By the time he had mentally drafted an entire essay, the sedan finally slowed and stopped.

“Master Zhu, we have arrived—this is the Zhuangyuan Tower,” came the steward’s voice from outside.

Zhu Ping’an stepped down from the sedan, bowed to thank the bearers, and lifted his gaze.

Before him stood a towering structure, three stories high. Its imposing height gave it the air of a small palace, built of brick, timber, and stone. Intricate railings lined its balconies, glazed tiles gleamed under the sun, and the faint fragrance of tea and wine drifted down with the wind. Despite its name—“Zhuangyuan Tower,” or “Tower of the Laureate”—there was nothing scholarly or austere about it. Instead, the place exuded an air of opulent extravagance.

It seemed newly built, lacking the mellow weight of history. Zhu Ping’an frowned slightly. How bold, to name such a place after the highest honor in the land. What kind of people dare such hubris?

The steward led the way, and Zhu Ping’an followed him into the grand building.

“Welcome, Master Zhu! May fortune favor you and place your name high upon the golden list!”

A chorus of crisp female voices rang out the moment he crossed the threshold. Inside, eight young maids dressed in embroidered palace gowns sank gracefully to their knees, folding their hands in perfect unison. Their trained precision revealed long hours of practice.

From the staircase descended a familiar figure, smiling broadly as he called out: “Hahaha, Zi Hou is here at last! Quickly, come up—the honored guests have been waiting for you!”

It was Luo Longwen. Zhu Ping’an narrowed his eyes. This was the same Luo Longwen who had openly scorned him at the last banquet. Yet now the man wore a beaming smile, brimming with warmth, as if they were long-lost brothers. The act was so exaggerated, so fake, it made Zhu Ping’an’s skin crawl.

Yes, Zhu Ping’an thought grimly. Today’s banquet is no benevolent feast.

For Luo Longwen to greet him with such false cheer could mean only one thing: they had prepared something in which Zhu Ping’an’s failure—or humiliation—would bring them great satisfaction. The “happy outcome” they anticipated was none other than Ouyang Zishi winning first place in the examination, while Zhu Ping’an was left to fade into obscurity.

Feigning simple-mindedness, Zhu Ping’an plastered on an even bigger smile than Luo Longwen’s, cupping his hands and bowing. “Hehehe, Lord Luo, it has been but a few days, yet it feels like three long autumns apart! Your distinguished bearing and kindly visage have lingered in my mind without cease. To be greeted personally today, I am overwhelmed with gratitude.”

His smile was so radiant, his words so earnest, that it made Luo Longwen’s grin falter, freezing stiff upon his face. The phrase Zhu Ping’an had used—yinrong xiaomao, “your voice and appearance”—was typically reserved for mourning the dead. Was this idiot deliberately mocking him, or had he simply misused the phrase?

But looking into Zhu Ping'an's wide, guileless smile, Luo Longwen could not be sure. Surely the scholar who topped the provincial exam could not be so ignorant... could he? Yet he dared not risk disrupting Yan Shifan's plans. Forcing his expression back into a smile, he gestured politely.

"Come, come, Zi Hou, don't stand on ceremony. Today's banquet is held in your honor, to send you off with strength for the palace exam. You are the guest of honor—Yan Donglou and the others have been waiting upstairs for quite some time."

Zhu Ping'an bowed respectfully. "My lord, please, after you."

After the ritual exchange of courtesies, Luo Longwen led the way up the stairs, Zhu Ping'an following close behind.

On the second floor, surrounded by attendants and flatterers, sat a one-eyed, heavysset man. The moment he caught sight of Zhu Ping'an, he rose with a booming laugh. "Hahaha, our promising scholar has arrived! Quickly, take your seat. Bring wine, bring the dishes!"

This was Yan Shifan himself.

Zhu Ping'an stepped forward, bowed deeply, and spoke with humility. "Lord Yan honors me too greatly—Ping'an is unworthy. Forgive me for having kept you all waiting so long; it is my fault entirely."

Besides Yan Shifan and Luo Longwen, five other men were present. Zhu Ping'an recognized them vaguely from the Yan household—though he could not recall their names, he was certain they were all loyal members of Yan's faction.

The trap had been set.