

## Rise 340

### Chapter 340: If I Am Well, You'll Be a Backup Forever

Night had thickened like ink, so black that not a single glimmer could be seen. The streets lay in utter silence, with only the faintest whisper of wind and the soft rustle of drifting fog hinting at movement.

Gradually, the quiet of the deserted street was broken by the distant sound of footsteps, echoing and clattering, shattering the stillness of the alley. Then, a warm, flickering glow appeared—torches carried by unseen hands—and soon, a grand sedan chair, swaying precariously as if it might toss its occupant into the air, was carried slowly along by four men.

Inside the chair, Zhu Ping'an could only give up on complaining. Forget the petty troubles at the banquet, forget returning home in the dead of night. But this—this was unbearable. The chair shook so violently it felt as though he were trapped in some mechanical car ride. Who could possibly explain this to me? he thought, exasperated. Had he accidentally set the “tremor mode” on the sedan chair? If the calm, quiet street outside weren't a witness, he might have sworn there was an earthquake.

The men carrying the chair were impressively muscular, their strength undeniable, yet every lurch and sway sent the sedan bouncing left and right like a wild bull.

Tomorrow was the imperial examination, yet he had attended a banquet that had stretched into the dead of night. He lived in the western district, while the banquet had been held in the eastern district—a journey far and arduous. And now, with the chair swinging violently, crawling along at a snail's pace, what should have been a simple return trip had taken far longer than expected. By the time Zhu Ping'an arrived at the Linhuai Marquis's residence, the hour was well past midnight.

Red lanterns glowed warmly at the gate of the Linhuai Marquis's estate, casting a soft, welcoming light on the few sturdy attendants stationed outside. As the four men set the chair down, the attendants hurried forward, their faces hard with disapproval. They had witnessed the deliberate tossing of the sedan chair and knew full well that their young master was still inside.

"Master, you've returned at last! Miss has been waiting here for quite some time," said one familiar-looking attendant with concern as Zhu Ping'an stepped down from the chair.

"I'm fine. Sorry to have kept you waiting," Zhu Ping'an replied, bowing politely. He recognized this attendant—one of the many who had accompanied Li Shu to the Marquis's estate.

Once Zhu Ping'an stepped down, the four men carrying the chair nodded and returned it to its empty state, carefully and steadily. The attendants who had been waiting outside escorted him into the residence. After confirming that Zhu Ping'an was unharmed, they quietly departed, leaving him to rest in the guest chamber.

Still dizzy from the violent ride, Zhu Ping'an sat on a chair, rubbing his temples. He thought briefly of the day's events, silently offering a small prayer for the family of Yan Shifan. After splashing some water on his face, he settled into the chair, preparing to organize his materials for tomorrow's examination.

Before he could fully get comfortable, a soft lantern glow appeared at the door. Li Shu and her entourage had arrived. Li Shu, draped in a plush fox-fur cloak, was accompanied by a chubby little maid and two older servants. The maid carried a large food box, atop which lay a neatly folded set of clothing.

"Did they force you to drink again?" Li Shu asked, her voice a mixture of irritation and concern. She had thought Zhu Ping'an, sitting there rubbing his head, had been subjected to another round of overbearing hospitality by the Yan household. Her cheeks flushed with a soft crimson, her pride and worry mixing in a delicate, coquettish tone.

Before Zhu Ping'an could respond, Li Shu turned to the little maid, instructing, "Hua'er, bring out the hangover soup immediately."

"I didn't drink; it was just the bumpy ride in the sedan. My head's still dizzy from it," Zhu Ping'an explained, smiling wryly and gently stopping the little maid from opening the food box.

"Why are you here?" he asked, rising to greet them.

Li Shu rolled her eyes dramatically, hands on her slim hips, exasperated yet affectionate. "I came to see if a certain stinky toad had turned into a dried toad! Hmph. Don't think I came here out of love. You're my nominal husband, after all. Sixth Sister and the others know you were invited to the Yan estate banquet, and you returned so late—if I hadn't come to check on you, they'd suspect something. I can't have them thinking I'm heartless!"

You think too much, Zhu Ping'an thought silently, staring at her in mild disbelief. Women had always been an enigmatic world to him. Back in his powerless, impoverished, and repeatedly humiliated youth, he had spent every Christmas, Valentine's Day, and any holiday remotely connected to romance being relentlessly reminded of his singlehood.

Women were like an indecipherable book, and he hadn't managed to read a single page.

“Don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not concerned about you. I just don’t want to be misunderstood. This is the outfit for tomorrow—your examination attire. If you make a fool of yourself, it’ll reflect on me as well,” Li Shu said, pointing at the neatly folded clothes carried by the little maid, her tone prickly yet caring.

“Thank you,” Zhu Ping’an said politely, bowing. Despite Li Shu’s usual prideful demeanor, he was genuinely grateful for the thoughtful gift.

“Don’t think I care about your thanks,” she said, pouting, her head tilted slightly upward. Yet a faint, barely noticeable smile tugged at her lips. “Come on, Hua’er. Let’s not disturb the stinky toad’s sleep—or risk him failing tomorrow and blaming us.”

With that, Li Shu, the little maid, and the two older servants left Zhu Ping’an’s room.

With the new clothes safely set aside, Zhu Ping’an organized his writing materials once more, extinguished the candle, and lay down, closing his eyes.

But just as sleep began to take him, an ear-splitting, earth-shaking series of firecrackers erupted from the neighboring Wei Guogong residence!

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang, bang, bang...

Awakened abruptly, Zhu Ping'an bolted upright in bed, muttering under his breath: I bought a watch last year!

These were no ordinary firecrackers—they were oversized, overpowered, and each explosion rattled the windows. He longed for modern fireworks regulations more than ever.

There was no denying it—this had Yan Shifan's hand in it. An underhanded, ruthless tactic executed to perfection. Fine, Zhu Ping'an thought, eyes gleaming with determination. Tomorrow's top scholar? That's mine.

If he survived this night unscathed, Ouyang would remain nothing but a backup, forever.

Meanwhile, a drunken Yan Shifan stumbled into his residence, supported by four beautiful attendants. "And Ouyang?" he asked casually.

"Master, Young Master Ouyang finished dinner before dark and, following your instructions, retired early to rest. He'll be in peak form for tomorrow's examination," a servant reported.

Yan Shifan nodded in approval, running his hand across a nearby attendant with a smirk. "Today, you've seen the power of your master," he chuckled, disappearing into the night amid the laughter of his attendants.

The Wei Guogong estate's firecrackers continued relentlessly through the night. When asked, they claimed the display was to ward off evil for Young Master Xu's examination. In reality, Xu had already been carried off in a sedan to a nearby western garden residence after dinner to prepare for his exam.

In short, Zhu Ping'an didn't sleep a wink. By morning, as he dressed for the imperial examination, dark circles framed his eyes, his expression weary and pale.

"Master! Master! Miss asked you to take this with you."

At daybreak, as Zhu Ping'an left the Marquis's estate for the examination, the chubby little maid caught up with him, slipping a delicate pouch into his hands.

Opening it on the road, he found a single ginseng root inside—its surface patterned with intricate swirls, thick and healthy, with fine, bristling roots. Its age was unknown, yet its quality was undeniable.