

Chapter 54 - Armouring Up

Xiong Xiangwu knelt on the ground on one knee; he was in miserable shape. Suddenly, he raised his head and looked at the top of the restaurant. A large figure stood there with the string on his bow still trembling. It was not as great as the Stone Splitter bow, but it was still a rare, steel, composite bow.

His eyes narrowed. "Huang Binghu!"

Huang Binghu said, "Stronghold master Xiong, that arrow was just a greeting. I hope you know when to retreat in the face of hardship, or you can't blame my arrows for being merciless!"

Xiong Xiangwu was covered in cold sweat from surprise. He knew Huang Binghu was not boasting. If Huang Binghu had launched that arrow earlier with his full strength in an attempt to kill, it was extremely likely for him to die on the spot as he was in the air. A hidden marksman with a geographic advantage was simply too terrifying.

Yang Anzhi said, "You're actually coming forward for this kid!"

Huang Binghu said, "It's true that Li Qingshan found the spiritual ginseng, but I've already consumed it, and it has healed the chronic illness that has plagued me for all these years. Sect master Yang, you have the wrong person." Behind him stood over a dozen hunters with over a dozen powerful bows.

The four great figures of the martial arts society of Qingyang had appeared together for Li Qingshan alone, either for him or opposing him.

The disciples of the Iron Fist school were in wonder, while the nearby residents also mustered up the courage to spread open their drapes slightly, watching this rare sight quietly.

The torches danced around in the cold wind, which made Yang Anzhi, Xiong Xiangwu, Liu Hong, Huang Binghu, and Li Qingshan's faces flicker. However, they all seemed to be frozen, without moving at all. Every single one of them had their own qualms and considerations. They were all connected to one another through various ties. No one dared to act carelessly.

Li Qingshan suddenly laughed aloud. His laughter rode the cold wind and spread afar. "Stronghold master Xiong, this is your only opportunity to kill me, so why don't you do it? Once I personally take your life here, the group of monkeys under your command will still have a chance to flee. If you miss your opportunity today, I only have to come knocking in the future, and your Black Wind stronghold will be uprooted completely, without a single person left alive!"

Arrogant! Everyone present found his words to be arrogant boasts that were jarring to the ear.

The Black Wind stronghold had served as a plague in the region around Qingyang for many years. Aside from the Drawn Reins village that was rather detached from the outside world, both the Dragon's Gate sect and the Iron Fist school desired their destruction very much. However, Yang Anzhi and Liu Hong had both considered this before. They only had a chance if they worked together, and even if they succeeded, they would have to pay a heavy price.

Yet now, Li Qingshan actually said he would destroy the Black Wind stronghold alone. Even with their impressive evaluation of his martial arts, they found him to be overly conceited.

Xiong Xiangwu felt more anger than anything else. He seemed more and more like a black bear. "Then I'll be waiting for you. If you don't come, I'll leave no one alive from the Crouching Ox village." In the end, he tossed out a vicious threat. "No matter who helps you, I will massacre their entire family!" Afterwards, he left in a hurry with his men. The disciples of the Iron School sect opened a path and did not obstruct them. This group of mountain bandits actually treated the entire Qingyang city as nothing. They were utterly lawless.

Yang Anzhi also used his movement technique and vanished in the night. His voice rang out from afar, "Just you wait, Li Qingshan. You will gain more and more enemies. Your day of death draws near!"

Liu Hong clasped his hands at Li Qingshan before leaving with his people, while the aristocrats willingly offered ten times the amount of silver for subduing bandits. They hoped for him to spare these disciples of the Dragon's Gate sect, and they wanted to avoid getting involved with the entire matter.

The messy restaurant had become empty. Only Li Qingshan remained on the window sill, holding the Soaring Dragon sword he had taken from Yang Anzhi.

Huang Binghu arrived with his people, and Li Qingshan looked back. "Hunting chief Huang, I want an explanation."

Two hunters brought over Xiao Hei, who had been tied up firmly, and Huang Binghu said, "Kneel and speak!"

Xiao Hei told the whole story from the beginning to the end before ending with, "Just kill me. I don't regret it!"

Huang Binghu said with difficulty, "I've watched Xiao Hei grow up, so you can only blame this on my incompetent guidance. Please spare him." He drew the hunting blade on his waist and held it in a reverse grip, stabbing it into his own shoulder.

"Hunting chief!" Xiao Hei called out in a panic.

"Xiao Hei, there are some things that you just cannot do. I, Huang Binghu, have killed countless people in my life, but I have never been an ingrate to the kindness that has been shown to me, much less return kindness with ingratitude." Huang Binghu extended his hand, and a hunter behind him passed another hunting knife to him in deep sorrow. Huang Binghu stabbed it into his left shoulder.

Xiao Hei's face was tear-stricken. He was filled with both shame and regret. Ever since a young age, he had admired and looked up to this man, even more than his own father. Yet, right now, he was bleeding for his sake.

Huang Binghu stabbed a hunting blade straight into his chest.

The punishment for an unredeemable mistake, a life for a life. This was the explanation that a man of jianghu could give.

A hand grabbed Huang Binghu's wrist firmly. The blade could no longer be thrust down.

Li Qingshan was stunned at first before feeling relieved. "Did the hunting chief plan on shouldering the matter all alone and then end it all with death? That'll be useless. Even if they're uncertain, they'll still come to find me."

Huang Binghu sighed heavily. Having roamed through the jianghu himself, he knew just how terrifying this matter was. A single martial arts manual or a single treasured sword could kick up a sea of blood in the jianghu. The lives of first-rate masters or even those beyond the first-rate would be taken away like they were worthless.

The red light in Li Qingshan's eyes vanished. He actually smiled. It was not a crazy smile or a wide smile, but a candid one like that of an ordinary youth's. "But I'm not afraid of them!" He said these words straightforwardly and with confidence. Before Huang Binghu could warn him, he continued, "Have you prepared my tiger bone wine?"

"I'll have someone deliver it tomorrow!"

Li Qingshan said nothing more. He still took the stairs down and arrived outside the establishment. Suddenly, he felt a cold sensation from his face. Looking up, the pitch-black sky was filled with snowflakes.

A transparent figure emerged from the scholar wood tablet, flying beside him.

Li Qingshan muttered to himself, "I'm not afraid of enemies. I'm afraid of betrayal." All he saw was Xiao An staring at him blankly. He could not help but smile. "You won't understand even if I explain it. It's not like you'll betray me anyway, right?"

Perhaps Xiao An did not understand what the 'betrayal' Li Qingshan spoke of meant, but he understood what he was expecting. Xiao An nodded in a great hurry.

"Let's go. Tonight is still not done!" Flames lit up in Li Qingshan's eyes as if they could even melt this world of ice and snow.

Old Knickers sipped on some alcohol and tended to a charcoal fire in the stove, staving off the piercing coldness of winter.

He never had a woman in his life, having spent several decades of his life guarding the armoury. Even his neighbours had forgotten his name, only remembering his surname Zhang. They all called him old Zhang or the old armoury guard. Afterwards, the children living close to him somehow came up with old Knickers¹ and that name stuck, adding an undeserved sense of degeneracy to the old man who had spent his entire life alone.

It was already very deep in the night, but he had yet to sleep. Just like usual, he would recall his life, extracting the most glorious parts of his memory as if he were ruminating the past. He would mull over it while he felt tipsy. As for the truth to these memories, they were just like his name. Not only was it the case for other people, but even he himself could not discern them.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The sound interrupted his recollection. He opened the door slowly. "Who is it? It's so late!" Afterwards, he saw a teenager standing at the door, smiling apologetically at him.

"District magistrate Ye has allowed me to take some items from the armoury. Here is the paperwork!"

Old Knickers shivered. Although many parts of his memories were exaggerated or made up all together, there was at least one part that was true. He had truly been a soldier in the past and had fought in wars.

He had witnessed the real thing, actual scenes of slaughter. The youth before him was very young and very polite, but he gave off an aura that he found to be familiar—murderousness.

The murderousness lingered without dispersing. This was a feeling that only brave and valiant soldiers who had claimed several dozen lives with their hands would possess. If he came across an enemy like this on the battlefield, he would definitely avoid him and get as far away as possible.

He did not even check the official paperwork properly when he retrieved the keys while trembling. Holding a lantern, he opened the gate to the armoury.

The gate of the armoury stood several meters tall and was forged out of pure metal. A total of thirty-six door nails were arranged neatly, and they had a pair of tiger heads carrying metal rings in their mouths.

Old Knickers pushed hard a few times, but the gate did not budge at all. He said awkwardly, “It seems to be frozen.” All he saw was the youth placing his hands on the ice-cold metal gate and pushing gently, and the metal door swung open. He stepped into the armoury alone.

Old Knickers pulled in his body as he waited outside. This was the first time someone had come to the armoury to take something out in the past few years. What is he taking? And what does he want to do with it?

As he wondered, a clinking sound drew closer and closer. A figure emerged from the armoury. The dark armour wrapped around his robust body, giving off an icy-cold, austere presence. The thigh guards swung around with his movements.

Old Knickers’ breathing halted, and he fell back on his bottom. He recalled the terrors of the battlefield and those callous, fierce figures once more. It felt like in just the next moment, the person before him would swing his blade and kill him.

1. The Chinese word for armoury, 库, is a homophone of the word for pants, 裤, so they sound similar.

The word for armoury guard or the person in charge of the armoury is 库头, while the word for knickers is 库头. It’s a homophonic spin on his name.