

Three-Time 151

Chapter 151: 151. A More Perfect Plan

The candlelight flickered.

Nian Ruxue's eyes turned dim, filling with tears, "Second brother, you know I was granted marriage to the second prince, right? Is it because I previously said that I was already the emperor's person that made you feel like I

deliberately lied to you?"

Nian Jincheng remained silent, held up the teacup, but didn't drink, nor ate the dishes made by Nian Ruxue.

"Yes, I lied to you back then, but I had my difficulties. Except for the fact the emperor didn't take my body at Changchun Garden, the rest is true." A drop of tear fell from Nian Ruxue's cheek.

Nian Jincheng still said nothing.

"I thought at the time that the emperor would definitely take me into the palace, which was irreversible. I was worried that you might think there was still room for a turnaround, and you would impulsively plead with the emperor. How could the emperor tolerate the Nian Family's refusal to something he didn't want others to know? If you angered the emperor, and you were sent to guard the border, how would I be able to endure?" Nian Ruxue sobbed.

"So, that's the reason." Nian Jincheng's face slightly eased.

Nian Ruxue sighed, "Second brother, I just asked you about the Nanping Prince, I simply care about your future, nothing else. The granted marriage is already a done deal. No matter how much merit you have, the emperor's word is gold and he won't change his decision easily."

Nian Jincheng nodded, "Hmm. I found out you were granted marriage to the second prince, and thought you wanted to enter the Imperial Harem and lied to me on purpose, so I was very angry."

"How could it be?" Nian Ruxue quickly shook her head, "The person I trust the most is you, the second brother. I didn't tell the truth at the time because I was thinking of you, so I didn't want you to get into trouble because of me."

"I heard you made it to the finals of the Military Exam? Did you practice martial arts secretly behind my back and planned to surprise me?" Nian Jincheng asked.

Nian Ruxue wiped away her tears, "I was waiting for you to question me and then explain, you stole my lines! I knew my second brother would understand me!"

“It’s a good thing, why would I question you?” Nian Jincheng shook his head, “I heard people say that it was because you beat the second prince that you were granted marriage to him?”

Nian Ruxue’s face darkened, “Who told you, second brother? How could I possibly hit the second prince?”

“What happened then?” Nian Jincheng frowned, “Without any reason, if the emperor has his eyes on you and plans to let you enter the palace, why would he granted you marriage to the second prince?”

Nian Ruxue forced a bitter smile, “I was framed by someone else. Another person hit the second prince, but I had to carry the scapegoat, and I’m suffering unspeakably.”

A dark light flashed in Nian Jincheng’s eyes, “Who?”

“It’s the other female martial artist in this year’s Military Exam, the granddaughter of the famous capital city doctor Su Yuanzhou who is still alive, Su Liang.” Nian Ruxue’s face turned ugly, “She’s close to Miss Qin, and we met at Huguo Temple that day. I wanted to make friends, but she had an inexplicable hostility towards me. I encountered the second prince pestering me in the back mountain, and just as I was about to find a way to escape, Su Liang suddenly appeared. ”

Nian Jincheng furrowed his brows, “What did she do?”

With eyes red, Nian Ruxue replied, “She is so beautiful that the second prince was immediately captivated and paid no attention to me. Knowing the second prince’s nature, I wanted to pull her along, but she refused. I suspect she deliberately approached the second prince, perhaps to avenge her family, so I had to leave on my own. Later, I heard that the second prince was injured and unconscious, and the next day I was granted marriage. Looking back, Su Liang’s martial arts skills are so high, she must have gone specifically to find the second prince, otherwise, she wouldn’t have refused to come with me.”

“So, the emperor misunderstood that you and the second prince had something going on and the second prince took advantage of it to lie that you two really had a relationship?” Nian Jincheng asked.

Nian Ruxue nodded, “That might be the case.”

“What are your plans now?” Nian Jincheng asked.

“I hope the result of the Military Exam will be good. By then, I will ask the emperor to let me join the army and guard the border for the rest of my life without marrying anyone!” Nian Ruxue’s eyes were firm, “Second brother, you will support me, won’t you?”

Nian Jincheng sighed, “How could things have come to this point? Nevertheless, even if you don’t get married, it’s better than marrying the second prince and becoming a concubine.

“Didn’t you say before that you also wanted to leave the capital to go to the border outpost? How about we, brother and sister, go together when the time comes?” Nian Ruxue’s eyes were eager.

Nian Jincheng nodded, “Of course, that’s what I want too.”

“Second brother, you’re really good to me. I knew you wouldn’t ignore my plight!” Nian Ruxue’s face was full of joy, “If His Majesty refuses or if the Second Prince tries to interfere, please make sure to speak up on my behalf, second brother!”

Nian Jincheng nodded again, “I will, don’t worry.”

“The food has gone cold, I’ll go and heat it up for you, second brother!” Nian Ruxue said.

Nian Jincheng shook his head, “I don’t have an appetite, I want to sleep. You should go back as well, the final competition begins tomorrow, and you need to get some rest. I’ll come to watch your martial arts performance.”

Nian Ruxue obediently nodded, “Alright, then I’ll leave first. Second brother, please try to eat some and rest early.”

Watching Nian Ruxue’s figure disappear at the doorway, she was still smiling at Nian Jincheng as she closed the door from the outside, and he nodded slightly.

Everything seemed as if nothing had changed from before.

Nian Ruxue breathed a sigh of relief with her maid, not seeing the sudden icy and stern look in Nian Jincheng’s eyes.

“Fourth sister, how was it? Is second brother willing to help you?” asked Nian Ruting as she saw Nian Ruxue return with a calm look on her face.

Nian Ruxue’s face stiffened, “He’s too stubborn, he actually gave all the credit to that Deputy General surnamed Lin! Infuriating!”

Nian Ruting’s expression darkened, “Second brother should know about your current situation, what is he doing?”

“You don’t understand him, he’s always been very by the book, inflexible.” Nian Ruxue said coldly.

“What should we do now? We were counting on him to help you.” Nian Ruting frowned, “Even if you become the Martial Arts Champion, without second brother’s meritorious deeds, it would be difficult to persuade His Majesty to change his mind.”

Nian Ruxue clenched her teeth and said, “I know. My original plan was to not make a move myself and have him ask His Majesty to change the decree under the guise of helping me. This way, the royal family wouldn’t think that I’m ungrateful. Anyway, second brother is always known for his honesty, and His Majesty values talents. At most, he would be sent to the borderlands if His Majesty gets annoyed with him. I can say that he acted on his own accord, and it wasn’t my intention.”

Nian Ruting was stunned for a moment, “Fourth sister, why haven’t you ever told me this before?”

Nian Ruxue realized that she had accidentally revealed her thoughts and tried to recover, “It’s just my own wishful thinking. If second brother isn’t willing to help, then it’s all useless. Now you see, he indeed doesn’t really care about me.”

Nian Ruting frowned, “You’re right, fourth sister. Second brother’s heart is cold. No matter how good you are to him these years, you can’t warm it.”

“Now that it’s come to this, I can only change my plan.” Nian Ruxue said as she gazed into the distance, “As long as you help me become the Martial Arts Champion, I will ask His Majesty to let me join the army and go to the border to defend Qian Country!”

Nian Ruting was stunned, “Is... is this serious, fourth sister? I can only help you participate in the military exam. The borderlands are harsh and cold – how can you endure it with your delicate body?”

Nian Ruxue, feeling that Nian Ruting was looking down on her, hid her annoyance and said, “This is the only way for me to avoid marrying the Second Prince and becoming an Imperial Concubine, and to have a chance to achieve military merits. The people of Yin Country mock Qian Country’s women. That Man Ya came to the capital today, and when I ask to join the army, it will be to gain face for Qian Country. His Majesty will not refuse!”

Nian Ruting nodded, “Makes sense. However, fourth sister, your martial arts skills are average, and you don’t understand military strategy. Going to the borderlands to achieve military merits will not be easy, right?”

“I’ve talked to second brother about it, and we’ll go together. No one at home cares about him, and he’s wanted to leave the capital and go to the borderlands to pursue his ambitions for a long time now. This is a good opportunity.” Nian Ruxue said.

“Can we really rely on second brother?” Nian Ruting doubted.

Nian Ruxue sighed, “Right now, apart from you and him, I have no one else to rely on. With him protecting me at the borderlands, His Majesty will be more willing to hear about the combined achievements of the Nian siblings.” “Will second brother agree to this?” Nian Ruting still doubted.

“He doesn’t like to take credit for others’ achievements, but he’s happy to give his own away. You saw what happened this time.” Nian Ruxue said.

Nian Ruting asked, “And after she has achieved merit? Will my sister really not marry and become a female general to make a name for herself?”

Nian Ruxue sighed, “Who knows what will happen after? I will avoid the spotlight first and as long as I have achievements to my name, I should have some say in whether I marry or not, right?”

In fact, what Nian Ruxue was thinking was that she had made use of Nian

Ruting to become the Martial Arts Champion, and then would leverage Nian Jincheng’s achievements to become a female general. After a few years, she could return to the capital not too old, and even if she wanted to be the crown princess, the crown prince who had long been interested in her would find a way to make room for her!

The more she thought about it, the more she felt that this plan was even more perfect than before.

Nian Jincheng was willing to give credit to others, so wouldn't it be easy for her to take it back when she wanted? It's as simple as a word and a tear!

"Tingting, my future and fate depend on you." Nian Ruxue held Nian Ruting's hand with a solemn look in her eyes.

Nian Ruting nodded, "Don't worry, sister, I will do my best."

The two sisters were like before, sharing a bed and intimate.

Nian Jincheng, who had been standing behind the wall for a long time, silently left.

The night was quiet.

Su Liang and Ning Jing returned to their home to stay tonight.

Su Liang had already gone to bed. Tomorrow was the final round of the Military Exam, and she needed to be in her best condition.

The light in Ning Jing's room was still on, as if he was waiting for someone to come.

"It's me." Nian Jincheng stood outside, and after saying this, pushed the door open.

Ning Jing was carefully carving a wooden boat, which was almost finished. There were fine wood shavings on his body, the table, and the floor, and a pleasant wood scent was in the air.

Ning Jing didn't even raise his head and simply said, "Sit."

Nian Jincheng walked over and sat down opposite. He saw a pretty glazed plate on the table, neatly filled with a dozen star-shaped cookies that looked very cute.

"Did Su Liang make these for you?" Nian Jincheng asked.

"You can try." Ning Jing opened his mouth, adding two more words, "One piece."

No more than that.

Nian Jincheng's heavy and depressed heart suddenly lightened, and a smile even threatened to break free. He picked up a small cookie and took a bite, "It's delicious. You never used to care about what you ate, but now you are very particular. "

"What's the deal with Nian Ruxue's martial arts?" Ning Jing directly asked.

Nian Jincheng's demeanor darkened again, "She found a substitute, my fifth sister, Nian Ruting. I don't know who taught her martial arts, I've hardly spoken to her. Did you know she was an imposter from the beginning?" "I guessed it." Ning Jing said.

"If I had been fooled by her again this time, would you not recognize me anymore?" Nian Jincheng asked.

Ning Jing directly asking about Nian Ruxue's martial arts meant that he had accepted Nian Jincheng's realization of her true identity.

“Recognize what of you?” Ning Jing asked. Nian Jincheng’s tone was melancholic, “I thought we were brothers.” “Talk about it when you’re sober.” Ning Jing said.

Nian Jincheng sighed, “I don’t have any attachment to the Nian family anymore. Suddenly I don’t know what to do. You’re the only one who cares about me in this world. What do you hope I’ll do?”

Ning Jing finally looked up, his cold gaze falling on Nian Jincheng’s face. With a disdainful snort, he said, “Can’t you survive without my input? If you don’t have anything you want to do, I suggest you become a monk.”

Upon hearing the last four words, Nian Jincheng’s face was a picture, “Bro, can’t you say something nice?”

“Nian Ruxue is all about saying nice things to you, go find her if you want to hear them.” Ning Jing continued carving his boat.

Nian Jincheng: .

The atmosphere was silent, and Nian Jincheng stretched out his hand, took the plate of star-shaped cookies, hugged it in his arms, and quickly finished them one by one.

Ning Jing looked over, and Nian Jincheng put the empty plate back on the table, saying two words, “Hungry.”

“When will you and Su Liang get married?” Nian Jincheng asked again.

Ning Jing didn’t answer.

Nian Jincheng took a wooden box from his bosom and put it on the table, “This is your wedding gift.”

He stood up, “Nian Ruxue cheating in the Imperial examination is a serious crime. Tomorrow, I will denounce her in front of the emperor. When the Nian family is punished, I may be sent to the Borderlands as a guard general, or just a common soldier. It’s not too bad. When you’ve made a mistake, you have to take responsibility. I’m a Nian, I can bear it. I’ll start over.”

Ning Jing said, “Someone will expose Nian Ruxue tomorrow, you don’t have to do anything.”

Nian Jincheng was taken aback, then sighed, “After all that’s happened, I realize I haven’t experienced enough in life. I want to get far away from the Nian family. When the time comes, I will voluntarily be demoted to the border, you won’t object, right?”

“Isn’t that exactly knowing what you want to do?” Ning Jing’s expression was indifferent.

Nian Jincheng rubbed his forehead, “I was really hoping you’d give me some advice.”

“Since you’re determined to be a military commander, go fight.” Ning Jing said.

Nian Jincheng’s brow relaxed, “That’s what I thought too. But aren’t you afraid I’ll die on the battlefield?”

“I’ll collect your body.” Ning Jing said.

But Nian Jincheng laughed, “Yeah, that’s what brothers are for. It’s late, I won’t bother Su Liang. Please tell her that I believe in her becoming the Martial Arts Champion, I hope she can fix your temper, and marry you sooner rather than later! ”

With that said, Nian Jincheng took Ning Jing’s just-completed wooden boat, “Give it to me.” And with that, he turned and left.

Ning Jing didn’t chase after him.

When Nian Jincheng returned to the Nian family mansion, he carefully examined the exquisitely carved wooden boat and found two words carved on the side: “Safe journey.”

Nian Jincheng was stunned, then slowly smiled, “It seems you don’t really want to collect my body..”

Chapter 152: 152. The Surprise of the Tenth Place

Martial Arts Tournament Day.

As soon as Su Liang saw Ning Jing in the morning, she was told that Nian Jincheng had come over last night.

“He finally recovered? How delightful!” Su Liang wasn’t too surprised. Ning Jing had mentioned this outcome before.

Ning Jing took out a wooden hairpin, “This is from him for you.”

Su Liang was slightly puzzled. What was the purpose of giving her a hairpin?

“I have one too,” Ning Jing said.

Su Liang took it and laughed lightly, “Then the one he gave me must be an afterthought; the main gift is for you.”

Ning Jing didn’t mention that the two hairpins were clearly a pair and only conveyed half of Nian Jincheng’s message, “He said he’s looking forward to you becoming the Martial Arts Champion.”

“Everyone is saying that, I suddenly feel the pressure,” Su Liang said calmly.

“Also,” Ning Jing continued, “he said he was very hungry and used the hairpin to exchange for your cookies and ate them, so you have to reimburse me.”

Su Liang: ... They were clearly good friends for many years, why was it her responsibility to compensate when Nian Jincheng ate Ning Jing’s cookies? Was this reasonable?

“Let’s talk about it after your competition, there’s no hurry,” Ning Jing finished speaking and left, not giving Su Liang a chance to refuse.

Su Liang waved her fist at Ning Jing’s back, thinking she wouldn’t mind making cookies; since Ning Jing loved star-shaped ones, she would deliberately make crescent-shaped ones for him without a single star!

Before they even finished breakfast, their friends arrived, more excited and eager than Su Liang, who was the competitor.

Worth mentioning was the newcomer, Duanmu Chel's cousin, Lian Shun, who arrived shortly after the others.

The lively atmosphere became somewhat delicate.

"Brother Ning, is this your friend?" Lin Xueqing purposely asked Ning Jing.

Ning Jing nodded, "Yes."

Lian Shun was dumbfounded, since when did he become Ning Jing's friend?

As a result, everyone else gathered around Su Liang, while Lian Shun, identified as "Ning Jing's friend," stood quietly beside Ning Jing like two statues...

To break the awkwardness, Lian Shun took the initiative to speak up, saying something he deeply regretted afterward, "Can I call you by your name? You can call me whatever you like."

"Okay," Ning Jing nodded, "Lian Shanshan."

Lian Shun was directly choked by his own saliva, coughing furiously and causing everyone to look over at his face, which was turning red and black-

Lin Xueqing whispered, "Su, is Ning Jing's friend ill? His face looks strange!"

The quick-witted Zhengzheng laughed, "He's sick!"

Lian Shun forced a smile, "Little cutie, what's your name?"

Ning Jing interjected, "Zhengzheng, this uncle is called Lian Shanshan."

Zhengzheng called out loudly, "Uncle Shanshan!"

Everyone couldn't help but chuckle.

Honestly, aside from the embarrassment of his name, Lian Shun felt the awkwardness of forcibly joining this group of people had been dispelled, and he even wondered if Ning Jing had intentionally given him a way out.

However, Lian Shun still could not accept being called Lian Shanshan by Ning Jing.

When Duanmu Che called him Lian Ershan, he always had to hit back; being called Shanshan sounded too feminine!

Lian Shun cleared his throat, "Can I call you Ning Liqing then?"

Ning Jing nodded, "Sure."

Lian Shun: ... Liqing Bishan sounds a hundred times better! What on earth was his grandfather thinking, giving him such a name? It's supposed to imply stability, but it's entirely unsuitable!

Even Ning Jing took the initiative to admit that Lian Shun was her friend. Although Qin Yujin and Lin Xueqing had some reservations about Lian Shun's infamous reputation, they didn't show it on their faces. After all, rumors can sometimes be unreliable.

Lian Shun came prepared to be rejected and driven away, as he wasn't invited, but the result was much better than expected.

However, he actually wanted Su Liang to acknowledge him as a friend even more.

"Let's go! My father and my brothers have already gone straight to the Battle Arena!" urged Lin Xueqing, fearing they would be late.

Lateness would result in disqualification for the Military Exam, and the emperor himself might even attend the competition today.

The servant Wan Hui sent to find Yang Yu returned yesterday, bringing a letter from Yang Yu.

Yang Family's business encountered some troubles, but with the help of Wan Family and Ning Family, things have temporarily stabilized. She is expected to arrive at the capital city in half a month.

Accompanying the letter was a "Top Scholar Battle Robe" that Yang Yu had specially commissioned for Su Liang by the best embroiderer in the Yang Family. The robe was made of a low-profile, luxurious black fabric with exquisite and intricate embroidery, and it fit her perfectly.

Lian Shun was amazed by Su Liang's attire today. Although she didn't wear makeup and her hairstyle was still as simple as ever.

When they arrived at the Battle Arena, it was already packed with people.

It was said that the princes and princesses have already arrived, and the emperor had yet to arrive. The drawing of lots would start soon.

Su Liang heard someone shouting from behind her, "Miss Nian Ruxue has arrived!"

She turned around and saw Nian Ruxue, dressed in white men's outfit and wearing a mask, getting off the carriage. Nian Jincheng dismounted, and another person, Nian Jinxing, also came down from the carriage. Nian Jinxing walked beside Nian Ruxue, like a protective brother.

Nian Jincheng followed silently behind them.

Ten exclusive seats were set up on the spectator's side for the ten martial artists competing today to wait for their turn.

Luo Rong arrived early and greeted Su Liang as he saw her.

"You go ahead, I'll take care of Ning Jing," Xing Yusheng said with a smile.

Qin Yujin pulled Lin Xueqing to sit next to Old Master Qin.

Under Duanmu Che's gaze, Lian Shun sat down, only to hear him ask, "You ran over there all this way, did they even pay attention to you?"

Lian Shun's face suddenly stiffened, "I messed up! I was so distracted by Ning Jing that I forgot to tell her something important!"

Lian Shun tried to go find Ning Jing, but Marquis Zhong Xin's seats were two rows apart, and the matter couldn't be relayed by someone else. Moreover, it was even more inappropriate to talk privately with Su Liang in public.

“Cousin, when will you leave?” Duanmu Che asked. Lian Shun pinched Duanmu Che’s leg and snorted, “Leave? I’m not leaving!”

“Is it because of Su Liang?” Duanmu Che asked.

Lian Shun nodded, “Yes, what about it?”

Duanmu Che glanced at Su Liang, who was talking and laughing with Luo Rong. For some reason, he felt extremely annoyed and snorted coldly, “She’s very good at dealing with men. You, who are good at dealing with women, may not be as skilled as her.”

Lian Shun frowned and whispered, “Duanmu Che, for the sake of being cousins, I won’t hold the previous matter against you. But don’t let me think that you’re losing your rationality and spouting nonsense because of prejudice and baseless speculation! Remember, you only suspect Su Liang is a spy, not confirmed. Before there’s definitive evidence, it’s best if you shut up! If I hear that kind of thing again, don’t blame me for turning on you!”

Duanmu Che’s face stiffened, and he lowered his head, suppressing the anger in his heart, “If you haven’t confirmed whether she’s a spy or not, why do you like her?”

Lian Shun snorted, “You think she’s a spy, so you should find evidence. Before you find it, there’s nothing wrong with her. Is this principle difficult? According to you, everyone is suspected of being a spy, so don’t bother living!”

Duanmu Che had no words to refute, he took a deep breath, forced himself to calm down, and realized that his remarks about Su Liang earlier were indeed too excessive. But he didn’t know why, when he heard Lian Shun say that he was going to pursue Su Liang, he felt extremely repulsive and couldn’t control his emotions.

Lian Shun looked at Ning Jing again, who was eating small biscuits from Zhengzheng’s little pouch...

Forget it. Lian Shun thought that since things had reached this point, whether he mentioned that matter ahead of time or not, the outcome would not change much.

Nian Ruxue arrived the latest, leaving an empty seat next to Su Liang.

“Miss Nian, the fourth daughter.” Su Liang had already learned from Ning Jing that this person was actually the fifth daughter of the Nian Family. Qin Yujin once mentioned that she was more beautiful than Nian Ruxue.

Su Liang took the initiative to greet her, but “Nian Ruxue” coldly glanced at her and didn’t respond.

Su Liang didn’t care.

Emperor Duanmu Yi arrived, followed by several concubines. The crown prince was accompanying a tall woman wearing a half-mask with bright and gorgeous clothes, her attire quite different from that of Qian Country’s women.

This person was Man Ya, the famous female general of Yin Country and even the world. She was also the envoy sent by Yin Country to Qian Country for peace talks and was rumored to be the future crown princess of Yin Country.

Man Ya's sharp gaze swept over the area where Su Liang and Nian Ruxue were sitting, with an undisguised provocative intent.

Suddenly, Su Liang felt that the appearance of this enemy female general might lead to unexpected situations in the Military Exam finals.

This was also the first time Su Liang saw Emperor Duanmu Yi of Qian Country. He possessed a very majestic imperial presence.

After a series of bows and salutations, it was time for the drawing of lots.

In the past, the competition was one-on-one, but this year, under Duanmu Chen's suggestion, the rules of the finals had changed, and there was no need for a draw.

This was a temporary announcement; aside from Su Liang, the other martial artists in the competition only learned about it just now.

And the new rules were exactly what Su Liang and Duanmu Chen had proposed.

The first round of the finals had turned into a ten-person melee — everyone was in.

Not only were the martial artists stunned, but the audience was also at a loss.

This had never happened before.

"How interesting! I'm looking forward to it," Man Ya laughed heartily.

The selection rules were as follows: the first one to be knocked off the Combat Stage would rank tenth, the second one to be knocked off would rank ninth...

and so on. The round would end when there were only three people left on the Combat Stage. They would be the top three.

Afterward, the final ranking match of the top three would take place.

No matter what the martial artists thought, the audience preferred the excitement brought by these novel rules.

Melee battles would not only test their martial arts skills but also their mental strategies.

As long as they could stand on the Combat Stage till the end, they would be considered skillful.

Gao Jiabao, who had faced Su Liang in the previous ranking matches, nodded his head slightly as he passed by her. Su Liang responded with a smile.

"Nian Ruxue" said coldly, "Miss Su, did you already know about the new rules and ally yourself with others? Isn't that unfair?"

Su Liang was speechless. Although she did know about the new rules beforehand, she hadn't formed any alliances. It would be easy to form alliances: she had saved Luo Rong's life and had exchanged medical skills with Gao Jiabao's grandfather, who greatly admired her.

As for Nian Ruting, who was pretending to be Nian Ruxue, Su Liang could only say that she was really going all out for Nian Ruxue to become the Martial Arts Champion!

Su Liang didn't pay any attention to Nian Ruting; she didn't believe that Nian Ruting would dare to start a fight before the competition even began.

This year's Military Exam was very special, not only because of the new rules but also because there was an enemy female general sitting in the watching seats, who must have been waiting to see the jokes played by the two participating women from Qian Country.

The last time Duanmu Chen had Chang'an bring a message to Su Liang, he urged her to do her best in the competition. The Martial Arts Champion of this year's exam must be even more favored by the Emperor than those of previous years.

After the drumbeat, all ten martial artists stood on the Combat Stage. For the melee battle, Su Liang chose her most adept Twin Blades because defense was of utmost importance.

Man Ya suddenly asked Duanmu Yi, "Emperor Qian, why is that woman wearing a mask and men's clothes? Is it because she feels ashamed to be a woman or that she is too ugly to be seen?"

Man Ya's voice was very bright and clear, reaching everyone's ears.

Duanmu Ao quickly stepped in to defend his betrothed imperial concubine, explaining that Nian Ruxue was too beautiful, and she was afraid that the men who fought against her would be lenient with her, which was why she dressed as a man and wore a mask.

Hearing this, Man Ya burst into laughter, "Just how beautiful is she? To think that the men on the battlefield would be mesmerized by her beauty! Are all eight of the most outstanding martial artists you've chosen in Qian Country known for their chivalry? How admirable!"

With this remark, the eight men on the Combat Stage felt ridiculed.

However, they were all seasoned in martial arts, having finally found a chance to shine. They had worked hard up until now, and none of them would let a woman win during a martial arts competition. This was no child's play.

Duanmu Ao's face darkened, "She's dressed as a man for the convenience of the competition! She can't wear a long skirt!"

Man Ya smiled sarcastically, "The other beauty is wearing women's clothing, and she looks very beautiful and seems comfortable. I really want to ask her where she bought it to get one for myself."

Su Liang was suddenly mentioned by Man Ya, and everyone's eyes fell on her.

Upon seeing her, people were amazed. Her ink-colored figure could easily be drowned in a pile of men, but when you really saw her, you couldn't move your eyes away. She was cold, noble, and composed.

In comparison, Nian Ruxue appeared even more pretentious.

However, Man Ya's mockery towards Nian Ruxue came to an end when Duanmu Yi announced, "There is no requirement for attire or wearing a mask in the Military Exam. Let's begin!"

Yet, Man Ya's brief remarks were actually planting enemies for Nian Ruxue. If those eight men harbored grudges, during the chaos of the upcoming melee, they might very well target her.

Duanmu Ao realized the problem and voiced his objection on behalf of Nian

Ruxue, "Father, General Man Ya's words just now were very disadvantageous to

Miss Nian! Why don't we change back to the original rules?"

Duanmu Yi's face darkened, "In the Battle Arena, everyone must rely on their own skills! People's favor is also a part of one's strength! Don't say any more!"

Duanmu Chen's cold sneer flashed by in the corner of his mouth. He hadn't expected Man Ya to suddenly target Nian Ruxue, but he was happy to watch the drama unfold.

Zhengzheng leaned on old Madam Nian, saying cheerfully, "My aunt is the strongest!"

As old Madam Nian thought of Xing Yusheng and Lin Xueqing getting married soon and her soon-to-be great-grandchild, she nodded in agreement with Zhengzheng's affectionate remark, "Zhengzheng is right."

After three drum beats, the melee began.

Nian Ruting knew the situation was unfavorable to her, so she deliberately stood next to Su Liang.

However, as soon as the battle started, Su Liang changed her footing and engaged with Gao Jiabao, forming their own small circle.

Gao Jiabao had changed weapons, no longer using a whip, but a long stick that Su Liang had originally planned to use against Nian Ruxue in the final.

Meanwhile, the other seven men formed a tacit agreement and began to besiege Nian Ruting!

Today, those who could stand on the Combat Stage were not only skilled in martial arts, but also had quick wits.

In fact, not all seven of them had their eyes on "Nian Ruxue" at first, but in this situation, it was a self-preservation method to just go with the flow and see if they could eliminate her from the competition. If they didn't target Nian Ruxue, they might be the ones besieged themselves.

As a result, there would always be a situation where the moment two people targeted the same person, a third and fourth person would join in to quickly eliminate the singled-out individual from the competition.

Temporary alliances might be unreliable, but useful.

Su Liang chose Gao Jiabao not because she wanted to take him down, but to convey the intention of forming an alliance.

To fight with four arms is harder than fighting with two.

A quarter of an hour later, the tenth-place finisher in the Martial Exam was born – it was "Nian Ruxue" who was knocked off the Combat Stage first.

This outcome surprised many people because before the start, Nian Ruxue had been the hot favorite to become the Top Scholar. Many people had placed bets on her and they would lose a lot this time.

The "troublemaker" Man Ya was all smiles, "Actually, my initial intention was to remind Miss Nian to take off her mask. Maybe a man would really find her good-looking and show mercy to her! What a pity, her swordsmanship was so beautiful, and I haven't seen enough. Emperor Qian, could you invite Miss Nian to perform a sword dance at tonight's banquet?"

Man Ya took the opportunity to viciously step on Nian Ruxue, and everyone could see she had ulterior motives. But who could blame Nian Ruxue for not being able to make a stand? In martial arts competitions, losing means losing.

Duanmu Yi nodded, “Alright.”

“Now, I am most looking forward to the performance of that little beauty. If she wins Top Scholar, I want to go and compete with her. Emperor Qian won’t mind, right?”
Man Ya’s gaze fell on Su Liang once more.

Duanmu Yi’s eyes slightly narrowed, neither agreeing nor disagreeing, “We’ll discuss it after the results are settled.”

Lian Shun looked at “Nian Ruxue” who had returned to the spectator seats and whispered to Duanmu Che, “We agreed that, for the sake of Qian Country’s face, if she became Top Scholar, we wouldn’t verify her identity. If Su Liang becomes Top Scholar, we’ll have them verify their true identity in public. Who would have thought this woman would lose so quickly! What now?”

Duanmu Che whispered back, “Father has already agreed and won’t break his word. As long as Su Liang becomes the Top Scholar, we’ll publicly verify their identities, and if Nian Ruxue is proven fake, she’ll die.”

Lian Shun smirked, “I can’t wait! Su Xiaoliang must be Top Scholar! Then we’ll knock down that annoying woman from Yin Country!”

Chapter 153: 153. Flying Again

After “Nian Ruxue” was defeated, the martial arts competition continued.

Some set their sights on Su Liang, but among the seven who had just “allied” together, several had previously fought and lost to Su Liang in the ranking match, and they didn’t want to provoke her again.

The alliance dissolved in an instant.

Three separate battle groups emerged on the Combat Stage.

Apart from Su Liang and Gao Jiabao, the other seven fighters had split into two smaller “subgroups” – one with two and the other with three people.

The ones under attack were those who had previously lost to their opponents in the ranking match.

Soon, the ninth-ranked fighter was determined.

Moments later, the eighth-ranked fighter was also eliminated.

In situations of a small gap in individual strength, being alone meant almost certain defeat.

The trio then started to attack the duo.

Luo Rong was among the trio. He had been eliminated during the elimination match but had entered the top ten through the Challenge Contest. Apart from Su Liang, he had not fought any of the martial artists present today, so they were somewhat unsure of his actual strength and hadn’t targeted him first.

As for Su Liang and Gao Jiabao, although they had been fighting each other seriously and splendidly since the beginning, it was unclear who was stronger.

The old Master Gao, who was watching the battle, knew that if Su Liang hadn't picked Gao Jiabao as her opponent at the start and formed their separate circle, making it difficult for others to intervene, Gao Jiabao would have been targeted by the larger, stronger fighters early on due to his seemingly weak appearance.

The other member of their group was quickly eliminated as well and ended up in sixth place.

The trio didn't turn on each other, but instead targeted Su Liang and Gao Jiabao.

Forming an alliance was not easy, especially with three of them being a delicate number. Seeing that as long as they could work together to eliminate the others, the top three would be fixed, their alliance seemed temporarily stable.

Luo Rong had also realized that the strengths of the two rivals were both greater than his, and they had incredible synergy, implying that they might have had prior interactions. They chose him because his martial arts could better help them defend.

Although Luo Rong admired Su Liang, the Combat Stage was no place for personal feelings; only strength mattered.

Now there were only five left.

Seeing that Su Liang was still fighting Gao Jiabao, with the other three casting covetous glances at them, Lin Xueqing anxiously said, "They are going to join forces to attack Su Liang!"

Old Master Qin's eyes twinkled as he reassured her, "Don't worry, Xueqing. Su Liang surely knows what she's doing."

The next moment, as the trio charged towards Su Liang and Gao Jiabao, the two fighters, who had been dueling since the beginning, suddenly redirected their weapons and faced the trio!

There was an uproar from the crowd!

Man Ya's eyes were deep with intrigue, "They are in cahoots! What a cunning plan!"

Anyone watching would have believed that Su Liang and Gao Jiabao originally wanted to eliminate each other as quickly as possible, but they, unexpectedly, became allies.

"Father Emperor, is it possible that someone leaked information about the new martial arts competition rules? It seems that the two of them knew." Duanmu Ao said, extremely displeased. He had originally hoped for Nian Ruxue to win, as it would cast him in a very favorable light. He hadn't expected her to be eliminated first.

With old grievances and new, all of Duanmu Ao's anger was now directed at Su Liang, and he did not want to see her win.

Upon hearing this, Man Ya gave a knowing laugh and said, "What if someone really did leak the rules in advance, forming secret alliances? It would indeed be unfair to those who knew nothing about it!"

"Exactly!" Duanmu Ao agreed at once, inspired by the support, "Nian Ruxue is very skilled, and this competition is unfair! I think we should follow the original rules and start again!"

“Second Brother, the decision to change the rules was Father Emperor’s idea, and it’s impossible that they were leaked,” Crown Prince Duanmu Cheng interjected.

Duanmu Chen knew what Duanmu Cheng was implying: that he, the proposer of the new rules, had leaked information to certain individuals who were still standing on the Combat Stage.

Yet, without any explanation, Duanmu Chen simply smiled and said, “Father Emperor, since the new rules are disputed, might I suggest that after the top three are determined, an additional challenge for them alone be held? Those among the remaining seven who believe they have the strength to challenge the top three may do so.”

Duanmu Chen’s suggestion not only distanced himself from the suspicion of leaking the rules but also silenced Man Ya’s questioning and any doubts about the results after the match.

Duanmu Ao was the first to praise the idea, “Well said!”

Everyone knew that Duanmu Ao was supporting Nian Ruxue.

Even the usually silent Fifth Prince Duanmu Che rarely expressed his opinion in public, “Father Emperor, I also agree with Fourth Brother’s suggestion.”

Lian Shun grinned, looking forward to Nian Ruxue challenging Su Liang and being defeated once more!

Emperor Duanmu Yi gave a slight nod, “Alright, let’s do that.”

Crown Prince Duanmu Cheng expressed his concern with a respectful demeanor, “Father Emperor, if we proceed this way, the remaining seven may be forced to try their luck. It will be a huge drain on their spirit and body if the top three have to face multiple opponents. That would be unfair too!”

Duanmu Chen knew that Duanmu Cheng didn’t want “Nian Ruxue” to compete again, after all, she was someone he wanted, but was now with someone else.

Furthermore, if Emperor Duanmu Yi accepted Duanmu Chen’s suggestion, that meant Duanmu Chen had won favor with the emperor, which was something Duanmu Cheng was unwilling to see.

Considering all this, Duanmu Chen said with a warm smile, “Crown Prince Brother, your concern is well-founded. The chance to initiate a challenge after a round of fighting is a privilege granted by Father Emperor, not something to be trifled with. Once the challenges fail, their martial exam honors will be revoked, making them think twice. I believe those with real skills have nothing to worry about.”

As Duanmu Chen finished speaking, he smiled at Duanmu Ao.

Duanmu Ao snorted lightly, “Of course!” As if Nian Ruxue was already his woman.

“Then it’s settled,” Duanmu Yi said.

The debate didn’t take long, and there was one less person on the Combat Stage.

Su Liang and Gao Jiabao teamed up, attacking with twin blades and defending with a long staff, their coordination flawless.

This also made people suspect that they had formed an alliance in secret.

But in reality, this situation emerged because Su Liang and Gao Jiabao had come to understand each other through sparring while the others were engaged in chaos.

Gao Jiabao was a smart man, being able to perform so well after changing weapons in just a few days.

The two of them faced three opponents led by Luo Rong. They didn't target Luo Rong first, because they saw that the other two were true partners and needed to break their combination.

It was Su Liang who chose the target and succeeded.

Muya had been watching the battle closely, her eyes gradually growing profound.

The situation turned into a two-on-two.

Su Liang and Gao Jiabao became even more in sync, while Luo Rong and his partner had less coordination.

As they fought, the other person suddenly turned against Luo Rong, taking advantage of his unpreparedness, and slapped him off the Combat Stage, disregarding the pursuit from Su Liang and Gao Jiabao.

Luo Rong's uncle quickly rushed to help him. When Luo Rong stood up, he looked relaxed, "I'm not injured. The top three are very strong, and I'm not their match. I didn't expect to get fourth place!"

The first round of chaos came to an abrupt end. Many spectators had been watching the two-on-two, thinking it would be a close fight, but the situation suddenly changed, and it was over before they could react.

The top three were Su Liang, Gao Jiabao, and Zhao Yang, the burly man who had mocked Luo Rong off.

Muya took the lead in applauding, "Fantastic! I'm looking forward to the match against the Martial Arts Champion!"

Some people may think that Su Liang and Gao Jiabao had spent most of their time hiding and benefiting from the chaos.

However, those who had watched the entire Military Exam clearly understood that those who had been knocked out early were simply weaker. Su Liang wasn't targeted by others, not because she stayed far away, but because there were several of her former opponents who didn't dare to confront her directly.

Gao Jiabao was somewhat carried by Su Liang, which he knew himself.

Even though Su Liang thought he had the strength to make it to the top three, the truth was, if he hadn't been with her the whole time, Gao Jiabao, who appeared weaker, would have had a hard time escaping being surrounded and attacked.

"Lao Si, tell them the new rules," Duanmu Yi ordered.

Duanmu Cheng's eyes grew cold.

Duanmu Chen stood up and announced, "The remaining seven contestants will have one chance to challenge one of the top three, but they must use it wisely.

If they fail the challenge, they will lose their Military Exam merit."

The ten-person chaos did not take long to finish, followed by a break. The Challenge Contest would take place next, followed by the ranking matches for the top three.

The common people didn't leave, discussing among themselves.

"Who dares to try? The ones ranked sixth and seventh can still be martial officers. If they lose the challenge, they'll have nothing left!"

"That's right!"

"It's better this way! They can't be unhappy about losing and want to fight as many matches as they want, can they? One chance, take it if you have the guts. If you lose, you can't blame anyone else!"

Many people agreed.

Luo Rong came down from the spectator seating and talked to his uncle.

"Shall we stop fighting?" Uncle Luo asked.

Luo Rong looked relaxed, "Let's stop! This rule benefits me, as the fourth place won't be challenged. As long as I maintain it, I'll win!"

"Don't say that. Even with the original rules, you could have made it into the top five," Uncle Luo said seriously.

Luo Rong nodded, "Don't worry, uncle. From now on, I'll just watch the others fight!"

Uncle Luo sighed, "I thought you had bad luck at first, but now I see the good luck was waiting at the end!"

Duanmu Ao approached "Nian Ruxue," "Your chance has come! Challenge Su Liang!"

"Nian Ruxue" nodded, "That's what I intend to do."

Duanmu Ao lowered his voice, his eyes dark, "Your victory or defeat is related to my reputation. If you lose, I will never spare you!" He left after the words.

"Nian Ruxue's" gaze fell on Su Liang, who was talking to Lady Xing in a low voice. Lady Xing held her hand, her face beaming with joy.

"Fourth sister." Nian Jinxing called "Nian Ruxue" three times before she regained her senses, realizing he was calling her.

Nian Jinxing walked over and sat next to "Nian Ruxue," frowning at her, "Who are you going to challenge?"

"The second prince asked me to challenge Su Liang, "Nian Ruxue" said.

However, Nian Jinxing shook his head, "No, don't choose her. I think she hasn't used her full strength yet, and you don't have much chance of winning." "Nian Ruxue's" eyes darkened, "What do you mean, big brother?"

"You should choose Old Master Gao's grandson. He just changed his weapon, and if it weren't for Su Liang's alliance, he would have been defeated long ago!" Nian Jinxing said disdainfully, "Make it to the top three first! Then fight Su

Liang, regardless of winning or losing, at least you can keep a third place title!"

"But the Second Prince's side..." Nian Ruxue hesitated. She originally thought about directly challenging Su Liang, but Nian Jinxing's words made sense.

"Don't worry about him. He can't do anything to you in public," Nian Jinxing snorted.

As he was about to leave, his gaze inadvertently fell on Nian Ruxue's ear, and his expression changed!

"Big brother, is there anything else?" Nian Ruxue asked.

Nian Jinxing frowned deeply, looked at her for a long time, and left her with a warning, "Don't cause trouble for the Nian Family!" before turning and leaving.

Returning to the Nian family's seats, Nian Jinxing actively spoke to the composed Nian Jincheng, "Did you teach Fourth Sister's martial arts?"

Nian Jincheng shook his head, "No. Today is the first time I've seen that swordsmanship."

Nian Jinxing glanced at the masked "Nian Ruxue" again, feeling suddenly uneasy. Nian Ruxue didn't have a black mole behind her ear, could it be that she really found a substitute? If someone were to find out...

Nian Jinxing didn't dare to continue his thoughts.

He suddenly had an urge to tell "Nian Ruxue" not to challenge anyone else, return home immediately, and act as if nothing had happened.

But at the same time, he still held out some hope. It had been so long, and no one had noticed. If Nian Jincheng had known, he would have stopped them. If they, as Ruxue's family, had not discovered it, outsiders would be even less likely to find out.

What if "Nian Ruxue" truly became one of the top three, or even the Martial Arts Champion? The uncle, serving as a concubine in the palace, had not given birth to a child and had not even had the qualification to watch the competition today. Losing favor was just a matter of time. Nian Jincheng was too single-minded to rely on. Nian Jinxing felt that the Nian Family needed Nian Ruxue to step up now.

With that in mind, Nian Jinxing sat firmly and didn't say anything else.

After talking with Old Madam Xing, Su Liang held Zhengzheng and sat next to Ning Jing, looking like a family of three at first glance.

“Auntie, there are no more little biscuits!” Zhengzheng opened his little pocket and showed Su Liang.

Su Liang smiled, “Do you want more?”

Zhengzheng’s eyes lit up, “Uncle and I both want to eat!”

Ning Jing remained expressionless, seemingly unrelated to him.

Su Liang suspected that it was Ning Jing who had taught Zhengzheng, but she had no evidence.

“All right, I’ll make more tomorrow.” Su Liang pinched Zhengzheng’s little face and asked Ning Jing, “Do you think anyone will challenge me?”

Ning Jing shook his head, “I don’t know.”

“I’m looking forward to the challenge from a certain Nian.” Su Liang said.

At this point in the martial arts competition, challenging the top three requires not only strong capabilities but also enough confidence, courage, and determination to gamble.

The temptation was great, and the risk was significant.

When the drum sounded again, the Order Officer announced the names of those participating in the Challenge Contest.

“Tenth place Nian Ruxue challenges Gao Jiabao!”

At these words, Duanmu Ao’s face darkened.

There was also a challenger for fifth place, which was against Zhao Yang. They were long-standing allies and knew each other well.

No one dared to challenge Su Liang.

“I think your weapon is a bit too heavy. Do you want to use mine?” Su Liang asked Gao Jiabao.

Gao Jiabao wasn’t tall and his staff was too long.

Having grown accustomed to long weapons, Gao Jiabao wasn’t used to using swords. But to his surprise, Su Liang pulled out a staff from under her seat.

“It’s mine. I was planning to use it in this match, but I didn’t expect her to choose you.” Su Liang smiled.

The staff was custom-made for Su Liang by Ning Jing. It was not heavy yet very sturdy, comfortable to hold, and non-slip.

Primarily, it was the perfect length for Su Liang. And Gao Jiabao was about the same size as Su Liang.

Gao Jiabao took it, tested it with a few swings, and felt it suited him quite well. He then accepted Su Liang’s generosity, “Thank you.”

“Her swordsmanship is decent, but her lower body movements are weak.” Su Liang added another piece of advice after having previously seen “Nian Ruxue’s” swordsmanship and discussed with Ning Jing how to deal with it.

Gao Jiabao frowned slightly, “Do you have a grudge against her?”

Su Liang laughed lightly, “You could say that.”

“I will do my best.” With that, Gao Jiabao took the staff Su Liang provided and headed towards the Combat Stage.

There were two Challenge Contest matches in total. The first one was “Nian Ruxue” against Gao Jiabao, and the competition was about to begin.

Nian Jinxing asked Nian Jincheng, “Do you think the fourth sister has a great chance of winning?”

Nian Jincheng looked calm, “I cannot evaluate something that doesn’t exist.”

Nian Jinxing narrowed his eyes, “What do you mean?”

Nian Jincheng shook his head, “Nothing.”

Lian Shun was a little disappointed, “Why is that woman so timid? She didn’t even dare to challenge Su Xiaoliang?”

“If she wins, she will have a chance to compete against Su Liang,” said Duanmu Che.

Lian Shun shook his head, “That guy is the grandson of the Imperial Physician who’s been treating you? His strength is quite good too and he is on Su Xiaoliang’s side. I bet he will win. Little Cheche, look at their standards; they don’t look very impressive, but they managed to make it into the top three of the Military Exam. When will you be able to stand up?”

“Stop being noisy and watch the match,” Duanmu Che frowned.

If “Nian Ruxue” won this match, she could enter the top three, and Gao Jiabao would become the tenth.

The match started, and Gao Jiabao’s stick created a fierce wind as he violently attacked “Nian Ruxue” low and fast.

The swordsmanship of “Nian Ruxue” was still impressive, but somewhat flashy without substance. They soon found themselves retreating under the relentless onslaught of Gao Jiabao, who didn’t even bother probing his opponent’s strength.

Before long, “Nian Ruxue” regained her composure, turned the tables on the disadvantageous situation, and barely managed to fight Gao Jiabao to a standstill. However, her knee had been hit heavily by Gao Jiabao’s stick earlier and, though initially not feeling much, later on, the pain became increasingly unbearable, causing her steps to become disordered.

Su Liang felt that Gao Jiabao would win soon.

But in the next moment, “Nian Ruxue” could have dodged Gao Jiabao’s incoming stick attack and avoided serious injury but instead chose to take another hit, thrusting her sword through Gao Jiabao’s shoulder!

The people in the spectator seats straightened their bodies, and the common people around the Combat Stage widened their eyes!

Until now, although the Military Exam did not restrict the use of weapons, there had been no deaths or serious injuries. All the contestants were martial artists and had a sense of propriety when using force.

It was clear that “Nian Ruxue” knew she would lose and couldn’t accept it, so she opted for a strategy of causing a thousand points of damage to her enemy while receiving eight hundred points of damage to herself!

However, this was not a battlefield, and what was at stake was victory or defeat, not life or death.

This was the first time in the history of the Military Exam that both contestants were seriously injured!

“Nian Ruxue” was struck to the ground, and blood gushed from Gao Jiabao’s shoulder. Moreover, it was on the side where he was using his weapon. If it couldn’t be treated, his arm would be useless!

Old Master Qin, the Imperial Physician, nearly fainted and quickly called for the match to be temporarily stopped.

However, the rules stated that whoever left the stage first would lose.

Duanmu Yi’s face darkened, and a figure flashed by. Su Liang had already landed on the Combat Stage with her medical kit.

“Nian Ruxue” leaned on her sword and stood up, coldly looking at Su Liang, “He hasn’t admitted defeat yet! ”

Su Liang ignored her and skillfully applied medicine to Gao Jiabao to stop the bleeding.

“She is the granddaughter of Su Yuanzhou.”

“I heard that her medical skills are amazing. She even cured Old Master Qin’s stroke,” the commoners whispered among themselves.

On the spectator seats, everyone had their own thoughts.

Duanmu Ao believed that Su Liang violated the rules of the competition and should be disqualified. If Gao Jiabao did not admit defeat, he couldn’t leave the stage.

Old Master Qin spoke up, “Miss Su is just trying her best to save a fellow martial artist.”

Duanmu Yi’s face slightly darkened, “I allow Su Liang to treat Gao Jiabao’s injuries and stop the bleeding. The match will be suspended for a quarter of an hour. ‘Nian Ruxue’ can rest as well. After a quarter of an hour, if no one admits defeat, the match will continue.”

The Order Officer announced Duanmu Yi’s decision loudly.

Su Liang didn't pay any attention to what they were discussing. While she bandaged Gao Jiabao, she whispered, "I think her injury is more severe than yours. She's just forcing herself, trying to make you admit defeat first. Can you handle it with your other hand?"

Gao Jiabao's face was even paler than before, but he coldly replied, "Yes!"

The rules did not require contestants to stop when they had the upper hand. Thus, "Nian Ruxue's" actions, although despicable, couldn't disqualify her.

"Just keep fighting. As long as you don't lose this round, even if you give up in the next one, you'll at least be a third-place winner. Anyway, the title of Top Scholar is mine, so you don't stand a chance," Su Liang joked.

Gao Jiabao snorted, "I know!" He had already lost to Su Liang once before.

The quarter of an hour passed, and Su Liang left the Combat Stage with her medical kit, Gao Jiabao slowly stood up again,— his right arm hanging limply. Picking up the long stick on the ground with his left hand, he pointed it at the other side's "Nian Ruxue" and said coldly, "I won't admit defeat!"

"Fight! Don't admit defeat!"

Many people below the stage cheered and encouraged Gao Jiabao.

Nian Jinxing's face looked extremely ugly, while Duanmu Ao was silent with a dark expression, no longer speaking.

"The match continues!" announced the Order Officer.

Gao Jiabao walked towards "Nian Ruxue". "Nian Ruxue", who was originally sitting on the ground and resting, tried to stand up but ended up falling back down, covered in cold sweat. In order to win, she had deliberately injured Gao Jiabao while also taking another heavy blow to the same knee. That leg had been injured three years ago, and now the bone felt as if it had shattered...

Finally managing to stand up with difficulty, Gao Jiabao had already arrived in front of her.

The long sword that "Nian Ruxue" was using to support her body had not yet been lifted off the ground when Gao Jiabao's stick swung over.. With one strike, she was sent flying out of the stage!

Chapter 154: 154. Martial Arts Champion

"Nian Ruxue's" path in the Military Exam drew to a close, amidst hushed gasps and incredulous murmurs.

The Gao Family members rushed onto the Combat Stage, and carried Gao Jiabao down.

The elderly Imperial Physician of the Gao Family urged his grandson to abandon the competition for the top three ranks, pointing out that it was already commendable to achieve the position of Martial Talent. Health was paramount and he must avoid combat until his injuries were entirely healed.

"I can't leave." Gao Jiabao's face was virtually ashen.

Even if he did not have the qualification to continue the fight and wanted to forfeit, he had to stay and watch the remaining finals.

At that point, Duanmu Che was pleading on behalf of Gao Jiabao, “Father, Gao Jiabao has sustained severe injuries. Should he want to forfeit the ensuing battles, could he be allowed to leave for treatment prematurely?”

Duanmu Yi nodded, “If he wishes to forfeit, then he is the Martial Talent.”

Gao Jiabao harboured no resentment. Zhao Yang and the contender challenging him were both from martial arts families, bearing formidable strength. Even without his injuries, his odds of success were slim.

As for Su Liang, Gao Jiabao sincerely wished for her to become the Top Scholar.

Although their personal interactions were non-existent, limiting their encounters to the Combat Stage, he admired Su Liang to some extent.

Hence, upon confirming his place in the top three, Gao Jiabao chose to forfeit the ensuing ranking contests, thereby automatically securing the third place as the Martial Talent in this year’s Military Exam

“Nian Ruxue” was still conscious, but Duanmu Ao did not so much as glance at her, acting as if he had no relation to this disgraceful woman.

Nian Jinxing wanted Nian Jincheng to bring “Nian Ruxue” home, but Nian Jincheng claimed to use the toilet, and failed to return promptly.

As a result, Nian Jinxing, who was itching to leave with a turned face, had to brace himself under the public’s scrutiny, assisting “Nian Ruxue” to return home for medical treatment.

Duanmu Che spoke up, decided to retain “Nian Ruxue”, “Father, Lady Nian’s complexion isn’t great. How about letting Lady Su examine her first?” It was no secret that Su Liang had served as Duanmu Che’s physician.

Nian Jinxing’s facial expression became stiff. A sense of ominous foreboding filled his heart. Since when did Duanmu Che bother about others? Why would he hinder “Nian Ruxue’s” departure? He definitely wasn’t concerned about “Nian Ruxue’s” health!

Could it be that this was a fake and someone from the royal family already knew?! At this thought, Nian Jinxing’s hand trembled slightly, gripping onto “Nian Ruxue’s” arm tighter, he respectfully said, “I dare not trouble Lady Su may the emperor permit me to bring my sister home.”

Duanmu Yi’s gaze fell onto “Nian Ruxue’s” mask, his face stern yet awe-inspiring, “Where is Su Liang? Go and see where Lady Nian is injured.”

Nian Jinxing’s heart sank dramatically! At this moment, he clearly realised that trouble was imminent, colossal trouble!

This person was likely a stand-in that Nian Ruxue had found. If discovered, the Nian Family would meet their end!

However, Su Liang, having received the imperial command, brought her medicine chest over to the lowest part of the viewing platform, a smile gracing her face, “Master Nian, please allow me to care for your sister.”

Nian Jinxing somehow found Su Liang’s smile inscrutably eerie.

Nevertheless, he had no room for refusal, and had no choice but to entrust

“Nian Ruxue” to Su Liang.

“Nian Ruxue” was turning pale and breaking into a cold sweat. She was in so much pain that she couldn’t speak. Her right leg was completely incapacitated and was hanging awkwardly at her side.

The second round of the challenge had already begun, but numerous gazes were still on Su Liang and “Nian Ruxue”.

Su Liang lightly touched “Nian Ruxue’s” knee, causing her to scream out in pain, nearly fainting.

Su Liang stood upright, removing “Nian Ruxue’s” mask swiftly and naturally, before either “Nian Ruxue” or Nian Jinxing could react.

Nian Jinxing barely managed to hide his panic until he saw the face beneath the mask, and only then did he heave a sigh of relief.

“What are you doing...” “Nian Ruxue” glared at Su Liang, trying to push her away, “I don’t need your treatment!”

Su Liang took two steps back, calmly explaining, “I have a specially formulated painkiller pill that I wish to have Lady Nian take first, thus I had to remove the mask. The martial competition is over, why would Lady Nian be so anxious?”

Man Ya, who had been keeping an eye on this side, wondered aloud, “Lady Su means well, why would this lady Nian look scared? Didn’t she say that she wore the mask to ward off the leering looks of men in the competition? Could she believe that Lady Su, a woman, would have the hots for her too? I find Lady Su far more beautiful than Lady Nian!”

At her words, more people turned their attention to “Nian Ruxue” on this side.

“I am unaware of why Lady Nian refuses to let me treat her, but it’s the Emperor’s orders. Please cooperate, Lady Nian, I mean no harm.” Having said this, Su Liang bent down to open the medicine chest, took out a vial of liquid, and poured it onto her hand.

“This is for cleaning my hands.” Su Liang explained.

Nearby, Lian Shun’s eyes lit up and he spoke quietly, “Little Cheche, that must be a cleanser for disguise makeup made by Su Xiaoliang! The show is about to begin!”

Su Liang spread the liquid on her hands, then took out another vial, poured out a pill, and approached Nian Ruxue gently, “Please calm down, Lady Nian, it will be much better after taking this medicine.”

“Nian Ruxue”, as Su Liang expected, refused to open her mouth. Su Liang maintained her smile, “The emperor is watching.”

“Nian Ruxue” finally opened her mouth, but not wide enough.

Su Liang naturally extended her hand, slightly raised “Nian Ruxue’s” chin, placed her fingers at the side of her mouth, causing her to open her mouth wide, then tossed in the pill and let go, reaching for the water flask.

The next moment, Lian Shun exclaimed, “What’s happened to her face?”

The people on the viewing platform, looking down from above, could clearly see that “Nian Ruxue’s” face, where Su Liang had touched, showed clear marks. It wasn’t that something extra was added, but rather, it was as if something was suddenly missing from those areas of her face!

Man Ya blurted out, “Disguise! It must be a disguise potion! She’s a fake!” The crowd erupted into chaos!

Su Liang held the water flask innocently, “I always cleanse my hands with a specially prepared medicinal solution before treating others.”

Despite his worst fears coming true, a glimmer of insight flashed through Nian Jinxing’s mind. He abruptly grabbed “Nian Ruxue’s” shoulder and harshly demanded, “You’re not my younger sister! Who are you really? What have you done with my sister?”

Su Liang: ... This eldest son of the Nian family is quite cunning. If this person is proven to be a spy impersonating Nian Ruxue, whether Nian Ruxue is captured or killed as a result, it can still save the Nian family!

But the mischief-loving Man Ya piped up again. “Emperor Qian, if one has real abilities, they could just take the military exam themselves. Who has the time to pass examinations on behalf of others? How is it that I never come across such good fortune? It must be because the real Miss Nian is incapable, and hired a substitute!”

Man Ya was not a simple character; he saw through the truth at a glance.

Although Nian Jinxing had been quick-witted in his desperation, he could not fool those who had truly experienced power struggles.

“General Man shouldn’t slander without evidence! Your Majesty, it must be this woman who harmed my fourth sister! She wanted to impersonate my fourth sister! She must be a spy sent by someone unknown!” Nian Jinxing spoke in a grave voice. “Even if the Nian family were filled with the audacity of bears and leopards, we would not dare to commit such grievous acts of deceiving the Emperor!”

Duanmu Yi’s expression was grave. “Bring someone, seize him. Su Liang, reveal the true face of ‘Nian Ruxue’! The imperial examination of the Qian Country cannot tolerate any cheating or fraud!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Su Liang dutifully replied.

“Nian Ruxue” turned as pale as death, immobilized by the two people gripping her, as Su Liang removed the disguise from her face before everyone’s eyes, revealing her true identity.

Many people had forgotten that the Nian family had a fifth daughter, but Qin Yujin recognized Nian Ruting, and her face reflected her shock.

Upon seeing Nian Ruting’s face, Nian Jinxing was stunned as if struck by lightning. He stared at her, unable to utter a word!

If it was a stranger, he could argue that the stranger is a spy. But this impersonation of Nian Ruxue was actually his own younger sister!

Soon enough, everyone came to know that she is Nian Ruting, who was sent to the countryside estate of the Nian family for treatment.

While the challenge contest on the combat stage was yet to conclude, everyone’s attention was directed elsewhere.

The manipulation of the Nian sisters, Ruxue and Ruting, was simply unbelievable.

“Emperor Qian, it seems she has always been wearing a mask to prevent people from discovering her true identity. After all, even with a disguise, certain mannerisms would give her away, so it’s safer to hide behind some concealment. Man Ya scoffed, “This fifth Miss Nian also had the qualifications to participate in the military exam. She stubbornly chose to fight for her sister, truly a demonstration of sisterly love!”

Duanmu Yi did not intend to trivialize the issue. When Nian Ruting was first eliminated in the initial round of chaos, she lost her value.

Nian Jinxing and Nian Ruting were forced to kneel on the ground while Su Liang quietly returned to her original position with her medicine box in silence.

While this might not be the most severe case of fraud in the history of the imperial examination of the Qian Country, it will certainly be the most sensational.

“Who is the main conspirator?” Duanmu Yi demanded coldly.

Nian Jinxing replied gravely, “Your Majesty, I know nothing about this!”

“I am the mastermind!” Nian Ruting’s voice was weak but very resolute, “I was jealous that my fourth sister was better than me in everything, so I wanted to live in her place!”

Man Ya chuckled dismissively, “You are more beautiful than your fourth sister, and your status is not inferior to hers. I’m curious, how is she better than you? And in which aspect? Would the heavens strike the Nian family with lightning if Miss Nian Five entered the military exam with her own identity?”

“Your Majesty, it was all my idea, it has nothing to do with my fourth sister or anyone else!” The expression on Nian Ruting’s face was urgent as she tried to explain.

But at this point, no matter what reason she gives, it won't hold water in the face of the facts.

"Take them away. Arrest everyone in the Nian Mansion and interrogate them thoroughly!" Duanmu Yi ordered coldly.

"Your Majesty! It was really all my idea!

I beg Your Majesty to rescind the punishment!" Nian Ruting cried out.

Su Liang massaged her temples, what exactly was going through Miss Nian five's mind? It seems she is another person under the control of Nian Ruxue, trying desperately to protect Nian Ruxue even at this point. But the more she spoke, the more mistakes she made. Her words added fuel to the fire! What was left of Nian Ruxue had now been utterly destroyed...

Sure enough, as soon as Nian Ruting finished speaking, all eyes in the court were on the second prince, Duanmu Ao.

His face alternated between green and pale, he was seething with rage, gritting his teeth, "The Imperial Marriage was an act of grace by our Emperor. The Nian family despises the imperial power, daring to offend the heavens. I request that the entire Nian family be executed!"

It wasn't until this point that Nian Jincheng, who had left earlier under an excuse, finally returned.

"Brother! You have to beg the Emperor on our behalf! We really didn't know anything about this!" Nian Jinxing cried out.

Everyone was watching Nian Jincheng's reaction and waiting to see if Duanmu Yi would also arrest him.

Man Ya "kindly" cleared Nian Jincheng's doubts in a sarcastic tone that was very close to the truth.

"General Nian, you should beg Emperor Qian for mercy! You just returned to the capital last night, so you must not be aware of this." Man Ya public displayed a quite unusual attitude toward Nian Jincheng.

Instead, Nian Jincheng knelt down and said loudly, "I had left home and was not aware of what they have done. I believe that His Majesty will find out the truth. Whoever made a mistake, the law will punish them severely to serve as a warning to others!"

This plea for mercy completely shattered the hopes of Nian Jinxing and Nian Ruting...

Nian Jincheng was also asked to cooperate with the investigation.

At this moment, the second round of the challenge contest finally ended. The winner was Zhao Yang, but he had also been badly injured.

As a result, Zhao Yang took the initiative to forfeit his right to compete in the subsequent competition for the Top Scholar.

Duanmu Yi granted it and announced that there would be no second place in the current military exam. Gao Jiabao and Zhao Yang ended in a tie, but both were titled as Martial Talents.

"Auntie is the Top Scholar!" Zhengzheng cheered jubilantly.

Su Liang felt a little dazed. She had been preparing for a final battle for a long time, and she didn't expect that she would not even have to fight much before she became the Top Scholar?

However, her preparations found value, as Man Ya once again challenged the Martial Artis Champion, Su Liang.

Duanmu Yi publicly asked if Su Liang dared to accept the challenge.

Declining would embarrass the Qian country. Losing would also bring shame to the Qian country.

Therefore, Su Liang soon had to face a real battle. Only if she won, her goals of becoming the Top Scholar would possibly be realized. If she lost, she would certainly bear disgrace..

Chapter 155: 155. Regaining the Field

The match would begin in a quarter of an hour, drawing everyone's attention. Xing Yu Sheng subconsciously asked Ning Jing, "What is Mu Ya's strength like?"

"Mu-what!" Zhengzheng said with a cheeky smile.

Ning Jing replied indifferently, "How would I know?"

Xing Yusheng coughed lightly, "I don't know why, but I feel like you might know."

Old Madame Xing asked Ning Jing to bring some food to Su Liang, "Tell Miss Liang not to be nervous, we all believe in her."

Ning Jing then took the box of snacks the old lady had given him, picked up Zhengzheng, and went to find Su Liang on the side of the viewing platform.

Luo Rong was talking to Su Liang when he saw Ning Jing coming over. He smiled at him and returned to his original position.

The seats beside Su Liang had originally belonged to Nian Ruxue and Gao Jiabao, but they had left.

Ning Jing sat down and put Zhengzheng on the ground.

Zhengzheng immediately pounced and hugged Su Liang's leg, "Auntie is the strongest! Defeat her!"

Su Liang chuckled softly and rubbed Zhengzheng's fluffy little head, "Alright." In fact, she had no idea how strong Mu Ya was.

According to the rumors, she was a martial arts prodigy from Yin Country, born as a commoner and fought her way up to her current position, by no means a simple character.

Ning Jing opened the snack box and took out a piece, feeding Zhengzheng instead.

"I thought it was for me." Su Liang hummed lightly.

Ning Jing shook his head slightly, "Too sweet, you don't like it."

Su Liang judged whether a snack was good or not based on its sweetness. She refused anything too sweet.

“She uses a long sword, and you use a long spear. Her leg skills are strong, so be careful.” Ning Jing fed Zhengzheng the snack with his head lowered, and from an outsider’s perspective, it was impossible to tell that he was speaking.

As Ning Jing’s words fell, Su Liang saw Qi Yan and Qi Jun bring her a long spear wrapped in cloth.

Su Liang lowered her head and pinched Zhengzheng’s little face, “Have you sparred with her before?”

As Zhengzheng accepted the feeding and pinching, he listened to the secret conversation between the two, his eyes sparkling.

“I’ve only seen.” Ning Jing said, “She’s a right-handed swordswoman, but her left hand is also strong. She’ll suddenly switch hands at critical moments, and that’s her secret technique.”

Listening to this, it seemed Mu Ya was very powerful, so Su Liang asked Ning Jing, “How much chance do I have of winning?”

“Zhengzheng, hold out your hand.” Ning Jing said. Zhengzheng stretched out one little hand.

Su Liang understood, 50%.

The next moment, Zhengzheng stretched out another small hand and put them together.

Su Liang heard Ning Jing say, “Right now it’s 50%, if you win, it’s 100%.

Zhengzheng is so smart.”

Su Liang: ...Are you sure you’re not teasing me?

The drums sounded below, and Mu Ya leaped onto the Combat Stage, having changed into a new outfit, her figure tall and voluptuous.

“Miss Su, come on!” Mu Ya still wore her half-mask, but her arrogance was hard to conceal.

Ning Jing took the snack box, picked up Zhengzheng, and left.

Su Liang walked down from the viewing platform, and Qi Yan removed the cloth covering the long spear and handed it to her.

Mu Ya’s eyes flashed, she hadn’t expected Su Liang to change weapons.

But the common people who had been watching the fights all along knew that this Martial Arts Champion was proficient in all eighteen types of weapons, changing one for each match, and they were used to it.

Watching Su Liang walk onto the Combat Stage, Crown Prince Duanmu Cheng asked Duanmu Chen, “Fourth brother, do you think Miss Su has a better chance of winning?”

Duanmu Chen knew that people suspected Su Liang was his acquaintance, and that they had met in Bei'an County.

He didn't fall for the trap and said seriously, "Although I've seen a few of Miss Su's matches, I don't know the strength of General Mu Ya, so it's hard to say."

"What does Fifth Brother think? I heard Miss Su is treating you, and your complexion looks much better than last time." Duanmu Cheng then pointed the spearhead at Duanmu Che.

It was Lian Shun who answered, "My cousin doesn't know martial arts, so it's better to ask me, Your Highness the Crown Prince."

Duanmu Cheng's smile deepened, "What does Master Lin think?"

"My family lives in the south, and I've heard quite a few whispers about this female General Mu. She's very skilled in martial arts and ruthless when striking. Many people in Yin Country who didn't submit to her challenged her, and they either died or were injured." Lian Shun said.

Duanmu Chen's eyes were slightly condensed. Mu Ya wouldn't be thinking of crippling Su Liang, would she? On the Combat Stage, where blades and swords had no eyes, it would be impossible to blame her later for such an event...

"Your Majesty, should we remind General Ma and Miss Su once more that this is just a friendly competition, and they should stop at the right moment? In case Miss Su accidentally injures General Ma, it won't be appropriate for negotiations with Yin Country!" Duanmu Chen said respectfully.

Although Duanmu Cheng knew that Duanmu Chen was trying to protect Su Liang, he could only agree.

That's because Su Liang represented the strength of Qian Country's women and the face of Qian Country's Military Exam.

Hearing Duanmu Yi say to stop at the right moment, Mu Ya laughed and said,

"Emperor Qian, don't worry, I will be gentle."

This statement was quite calculated. If she wins, it would mean she truly overpowered Su Liang. If she loses, could it be that she was letting Su Liang win?

The drums sounded again, and the Order Officer confirmed that both were ready and announced the start of the contest.

Mu Ya held her long sword, its cold light flickering.

Su Liang held her long spear, the red tassel at the tip dancing wildly in the wind.

For a moment, it created the illusion that these two female generals from different countries were clashing on the battlefield.

Although they were worried about Su Liang getting hurt and the outcome of the contest not being satisfactory, Qin Yujin and Lin Xueqing couldn't help but exclaim, Su Liang looks so cool!

Mu Ya suddenly let out a charming smile and attacked Su Liang with her sword.

Su Liang blocked the attack with her long spear, dodging to the side. After their first exchange, the two switched positions.

Lin Xueqing and Qin Yujin clasped hands, feeling very nervous.

Duanmu Yi on the viewing seat straightened up, and everyone became quiet.

Soon, the two engaged in combat again, with Mu Ya still on the offensive and Su Liang on the defensive.

After a dozen or so exchanges, they separated and once more engaged in battle, with Mu Ya launching a fierce attack.

The sword light flashed, and many people felt dazzled and couldn't see clearly. Su Liane's actions were 0Den and swift. not Darticularlv fast. but she always managed to accurately block Mu Ya's attacks!

Some thought Mu Ya was more powerful, as Su Liang had no chance to counterattack.

But the experts could see that Mu Ya was an absolutely aggressive martial artist, while Su Liang was more conservative and cautious. She just hadn't started to attack yet because her defense didn't require much effort. If someone else were in her shoes, they might have been awkwardly beaten down by this time.

As Ning Jing had said, seeing Su Liang's tight defense with her long spear, Mu Ya indeed started attacking her lower body.

Su Liang had been special trained by Ning Jing on the Plum Blossom Pile, and she always focused on strengthening her legs during her regular exercises. After dodging Mu Ya's several leg attacks, Su Liang planted the long spear on the ground like a pillar, holding it with her hands, leaping into the air, and quickly executing several consecutive flying kicks, forcing Mu Ya to retreat for the first time!

Su Liang landed steadily, and the long spear in her hand spun around, with its cold and gleaming spearhead aimed at Mu Ya. With a rapid charge, she switched from defense to offense!

Everything happened so fast that by the time everyone reacted, the two were already tangled up again.

Cheers erupted from the crowd, admiring Su Liang's stunning and fierce moves.

Someone shouted, "Hit her!"

Soon, waves of voices cheered for Su Liang.

After all, this was the home court for Qian Country. How could they allow a woman from an enemy country to be so wild?

The cheering and encouraging voices kept getting louder, making everyone's expectations for Su Liang reach their peak. Xing Yusheng sighed softly, "She must win!"

If she lost, she would be treated as a great sinner.

The spectators wouldn't care about Su Liang's age, the difficulty of learning martial arts, or her recent achievements. They wouldn't care that she was facing a female general from Yin Country who had experienced battles.

They would only care if she could win.

Ning Jing, holding little Zhengzheng, had a calm face. She lifted Zhengzheng's two small hands and shook them, "She won't lose."

Duanmu Che's eyes were fixed on that heroic-looking figure in black, unable to look away.

Lian Shun clapped his hands in praise, "Su Xiaoliang is really cool! Just like that! Beat her!"

Long swords were common, but long spears were not as common.

Most people present were seeing, for the first time, someone handling a long spear so beautifully. The red tassel on the spearhead seemed like a fluttering banner on the battlefield, captivating everyone's attention and emotions.

When the aggressive Mu Ya was counterattacked, her defensive ability was clearly inferior to Su Liang's, and her weapon was not suitable for defense either.

Mu Ya tried to break Su Liang's long spear several times, but Su Liang neutralized her attempts.

Although it still looked like they were evenly matched to outsiders, Mu Ya knew that if her attacks were all invalid, continuing the fight would be very unfavorable to her.

Hence, Mu Ya started to dodge and retreat.

Seeing this, the audience thought Su Liang's victory was near, and burst into cheers again.

Lin Bojun, however, was a bit worried, "That woman is full of tricks. She probably did this on purpose to lull Su Xiaoliang's vigilance."

As expected, when Mu Ya was forced to retreat to a corner of the combat stage by Su Liang, she launched her secret move. The sword in her right hand suddenly switched to her left hand, attacking Su Liang's wrist with an extremely tricky angle and speed!

If it hit, Su Liang would be disabled in an instant!

Perhaps only Ning Jing was calm in the face of this.

Lian Shun almost fell to the ground, tightly grabbing Duanmu Che's arm, his breathing momentarily halted.

Under normal circumstances, people would not switch hands with their weapons during a fight unless injured. Under normal conditions, the power and accuracy of an unfamiliar hand would be greatly reduced. If the weapon was knocked away after switching hands, it would be ruined!

However, at that moment, Su Liang seemed to have predicted Mu Ya's "secret move." When the long sword approached, she successfully dodged it and simultaneously swept her long spear under Mu Ya's relaxed right arm. With a quick step, she flashed to Mu Ya's back!

Mu Ya's secret move failed, and her face changed as her right hand was captured by Su Liang!

She tried to turn around, but couldn't make it.

As the long spear passed horizontally under Mu Ya's left arm from behind, her sword swung back without stabbing Su Liang. Instead, Su Liang grabbed her left wrist!

The long sword fell to the ground, making a crisp sound.

Everyone stared in astonishment as Su Liang, in a matter of seconds, managed to lock both of Mu Ya's arms behind her back with her long spear, tightly gripping Mu Ya's pulse, rendering her immobile.

If a rope were to be added, tying Mu Ya's wrists to the long spear, wouldn't this resemble the posture of arresting a criminal?

The cheering erupted again, accompanied by laughter.

With such an unsightly posture, Mu Ya gained a universally witnessed failure.

She didn't show any mercy, but unfortunately, she didn't manage to hurt Su Liang.

Su Liang carried out the Emperor's intention of stopping as soon as she made a point perfectly, without hurting Mu Ya at all.

Except if you count damaging her ego.

This greatly satisfied the majority of people who couldn't foresee the outcome before the battle and who were very worried that Mu Ya would humiliate Qian Country again! They felt so refreshed and invigorated! In a word – Awesome!

Lian Shun waved his arms and shouted, "Su Xiaoliang, well done!"

Duanmu Yi's brows relaxed, and he laughed, "Su Liang, aren't you going to release General Mu Ya? Be careful not to hurt her!"

"Yes, Your Majesty." Su Liang respectfully replied, with a friendly smile, "General Mu Ya, thank you for granting me the win."

With that, she let go of Mu Ya's hand, caught the falling long spear, picked up Mu Ya's long sword from the ground, and returned it to her with the hilt facing forward.

Her every movement was filled with vigor.

In contrast, Mu Ya's gloomy face seemed like she couldn't accept her loss.

After all, Mu Ya was the one who had proposed this test with the purpose of defeating Su Liang on the day Qian Country's Martial Arts Champion was born.

It was indeed a great opportunity to humiliate Qian Country. Unfortunately, her strength was not enough to suppress Su Liang.

It was also related to the fact that Su Liang hadn't revealed her true strength during the melee, which gave Mu Ya the illusion and made her think that Qian

Country's performance in this military exam was poor, and thus brushed off Su Liang as a third-rate Martial Arts Champion.

I take back what I said earlier about Qian's women only being able to embroider. Miss Su, not only are you beautiful, but you also possess great strength. You truly are a heroine among women!"

Whether Mu Ya was sincere or not, at least the face of Qian Country had been regained today!

Mu Ya grasped Su Liang's wrist and walked down the combat stage together, laughing and asking Su Liang where she bought her clothes, as she wanted to buy a set too.

Su Liang smiled, "A friend gave it to me."

Mu Ya didn't pursue the issue but instead hinted with a smile, "Miss Su has a promising future. If I were a man, I would definitely propose to you!"

At this remark, the princes on the viewing platform all had subtly awkward expressions.

"If I were a man, I wouldn't dare propose to General Mu Ya, for fear of being beaten," Su Liang joked.

Mu Ya spoke affectionately, but her laughter didn't reach her eyes, "Miss Su, you really are a clever one.."

Chapter 156: 156. Nian Ruting Testimony

After the finals of the Military Exam, the formal awards ceremony will be held after the top three in the Civil Examinations are announced.

Mu Ya invited Su Liang to have a drink, but Su Liang declined; she didn't insist.

Duanmu Yi called Su Liang over and praised her in public before the royals left.

Lian Shun walked away with Duanmu Che, glancing several times towards Su Liang's location but not catching her attention.

After the common people dispersed, Su Liang chatted with Old Master Qin and Old Madam Xing for a while before going over to her friends who were waiting for her.

Little Zhengzheng, riding on Lu Yu's neck, waved his little hand, "Aunt! Aunt!"

Su Liang raised her chin slightly with a smile, and asked playfully, "Who is the most amazing?"

With a loud voice, Zhengzheng said, "My aunt!"

Qin Yujin and Lin Xueqing held Su Liang on both sides, even happier than her, praising her nonstop.

Lin Shuzhi and his two sons looked at Su Liang with smiles on their faces.

Lin Bojun, who had just returned to the capital city yesterday, gave a thumbs up, "Xiaoliang is really impressive!"

Wan Hui suggested with a smile, "Let's all go celebrate for Sister Liang together! "

As the group walked toward the entrance of the Battle Arena, Lin Bojun occasionally glanced at Qin Yujin.

But Qin Yujin's attention today was all on Su Liang, and the two hadn't had a chance to talk yet.

Lin Xueqing brought up Nian Ruxue, who had tried to use her sister as a substitute, “All her scheming came to nothing! She ended up harming her whole family!”

Qin Yujin sighed softly, “Perhaps it wasn’t Nian Ruxue’s own idea, but a conspiracy of the Nian Family.”

Lin Bojun said seriously, “I can’t vouch for the others in the Nian Family, but I’m sure General Nian was not involved. After he found out Nian Ruxue’s true identity, he no longer protected her.”

Otherwise, Nian Jincheng would have definitely pleaded for Nian Ruxue and the Nian Family members back then.

Lin Xueqing didn’t expect her second brother to be speaking up for his “love rival. ”

As a result, Qin Yujin added, “Those who do wrong should be held responsible; the emperor will decide their punishment according to the law. The Nian Family’s affairs have nothing to do with us.”

Today’s events made Qin Yujin hate the Nian Family even more. Her once vague and fleeting fondness for Nian Jincheng had long since disappeared.

Su Liang felt that no matter what the outcome was for the Nian Family, Nian Jincheng could still survive based on his abilities and even have the opportunity to start over.

At the restaurant, everyone raised their glasses to celebrate Su Liang’s victory as the Martial Arts Champion, as well as her defeating the enemy’s female general for the country’s honor.

Little Zhengzheng struggled to raise his small teacup, bumping it against Su Liang’s, and earnestly said, “When I grow up, I also want to be a Top Scholar!”

Everyone burst into laughter.

After arriving in the capital city with nothing to do, Lin Shuzhi found Zhengzheng intelligent and became very fond of him, so he proposed to educate and teach him how to read.

Wan Hui and Lu Yu were overjoyed and agreed without hesitation.

As the banquet was halfway through, Qi Yan brought news that Nian Ruxue had disappeared from the Nian Family, and no trace of her had been found!

“She was the mastermind and managed to run away?” Xing Yusheng scoffed, “If the other Nian Family members didn’t know, Nian Ruxue could still save her family by taking all the blame herself. With her gone, it is difficult for the Nian Family to clear their names. Ruting, her substitute, can’t bear such a heavy responsibility.”

Nian Ruting wanted to take the blame, but her reasons couldn’t stand up to scrutiny.

There were only two possibilities in this matter.

Either the Nian Family conspired together to have Nian Ruting replace Nian Ruxue in seeking fame in the Military Exam, or Nian Ruxue secretly arranged for Nian Ruting to be her substitute without the rest of the Nian Family knowing.

If it was the former, the Nian Family would be doomed, and their lives might even be in danger.

If it was the latter, at least the Nian Family would have a chance to save their lives.

But with Nian Ruxue's escape, she was not confessing her guilt, and it would be very difficult for the Nian Family to clear their names.

Lin Xueqing sighed softly, "That Nian Ruting is really foolish. She was willing to do anything for Nian Ruxue and is still protecting her to the end. But Nian Ruxue is nothing but a selfish and shameless person."

Lin Bojun shook his head, "From the incident of Nian Ruting wounding the Young Master Gao in the Challenge Contest, it's evident that she isn't a good person either."

It wasn't long before news came that the royal family had sent elite troops to search and arrest Nian Ruxue.

In the afternoon, Su Liang accompanied Qin Yujin to the Qin Mansion, while Ning Jing went alone to Fifth Prince's Mansion to treat Duanmu Chen with acupuncture.

On the way, Su Liang jokingly asked, "Do you still have any lingering thoughts for Nian Jincheng?"

Qin Yujin was taken aback and shook her head with a smile, "No more. Maybe what General Lin said is true, but I don't care anymore."

"What about considering Second Brother Lin?" Su Liang asked half-jokingly,

"He has been looking at you!"

"Ah?" Qin Yujin looked surprised, "Lin... General Lin? With me? Are we..." Her voice trailed off, and her cheeks flushed with two rosy clouds, "Are we suitable?"

"It depends on how you feel." Su Liang laughed, "He definitely likes you; there's no doubt about it.

After a long pause, Qin Yujin clenched her fists and lightly hit Su Liang, "You sly girl, are you acting as a matchmaker?"

Su Liang nodded seriously, "Indeed, Second Brother Lin asked me for a favor before the New Year, but there has been no opportunity before. I am the intermediary, and I want to be the matchmaker. It depends on whether you give me a chance or not."

Qin Yujin glared at Su Liang, "You are not on my side? I'm heartbroken."

Su Liang's lips curled slightly, "Is that so? Then, I'll go on your behalf to ask for your hand in marriage. I'm on your side!"

Qin Yujin pinched Su Liang's cheek, "I won't give you that chance!" Her face reddened even more with those words.

Su Liang smiled, "Fate is destined. Whether I become a matchmaker or not doesn't matter."

When Su Liang left Qin Mansion and returned home, Ning Jing was already there.

He handed Su Liang an exquisite invitation, sent from the palace, inviting Su

Liang to attend a banquet that night to welcome the envoys from Yin Country.

“Only inviting me?” Su Liang looked at her name only on the invitation, and quickly realized, “Tomorrow is the Palace Exam, and you’re not yet the Top Scholar. Can I not go?”

Ning Jing shook his head, “No, you can’t.” Unless they planned to give up everything and leave the capital, it wasn’t worth it.

“Alright then.” Su Liang reluctantly agreed. “It’s a pity that Man Ya invited Nian Ruting for a sword dance, and I won’t be able to see it. Where do you think Nian Ruxue has fled to?”

“I don’t know.” Ning Jing shook his head.

“Never mind.” Su Liang temporarily put Nian Ruxue out of her mind and picked out a few dresses, asking Ning Jing which one would be appropriate for the banquet tonight.

Since she had to socialize, she didn’t want to stand out too much.

Ning Jing picked a simple and elegant one. Su Liang thought it was not bad. After bathing and changing her clothes, the sun had set, and it was almost time to go to the palace.

“Let’s go.” Ning Jing held a straw hat and Su Liang’s medicine box in his hands.

Su Liang raised an eyebrow, “Are you going to be my carriage driver? I’m getting quite the royal treatment.”

“It’s not like I haven’t done it before.” Ning Jing walked out.

Su Liang followed with a smile, “Next time it’s my turn.” It wasn’t convenient for her to ride a horse in a long dress.

Su Liang got on the carriage, and Ning Jing handed her the medicine box, “Take it with you.”

He put on the straw hat, covering half of his face, and drove the carriage away from the house towards the Imperial Palace.

They didn’t encounter any trouble on their way. When they arrived at the square outside the palace, other palace nobles also arrived one after another.

Su Liang got off the carriage with her medicine box and told Ning Jing to go back first, not to wait for her, “I don’t know how long it will take. I’ll go home by myself when it’s over.”

“Okay.” Ning Jing agreed and left with the carriage.

This was Su Liang’s first visit to the Qian Country’s Imperial Palace.

Under the night, the towering palace walls were dark, giving off an extremely strong oppressive feeling.

The palace maids who greeted Su Liang had fixed angles of their heads when they spoke, their mouths barely moving, their faces like they had been painted with white, with pale complexions and frozen expressions.

It was suffocating everywhere.

Su Liang heard someone calling her and turned to see Xing Ji and his son Xing Yusheng walking towards her.

She let out a sigh of relief. Seeing familiar faces felt much better.

“Marquis.” Su Liang bowed to Xing Ji.

Xing Ji nodded slightly, “You did a good job in today’s contest.”

Su Liang accompanied Xing Ji and his son. It was Xing Yusheng’s first visit to the palace, and he didn’t recognize the various places.

Xing Ji would briefly introduce the areas they passed by to them.

Inside the magnificent palace, there were burning incense that refreshed the heart and mind, and palace maids with delicate makeup and light footsteps.

Su Liang couldn’t find her seat, so she sat in the Marquis Zhong Xin’s seat.

The princes and princesses had arrived. Duanmu Ao appeared as if nothing had happened, accompanied by his pregnant second prince’s wife.

Duanmu Chen’s seat was not far from Marquis Zhong Xin’s, and he smiled warmly at Su Liang.

Duanmu Che arrived, and Lian Shun followed. Their eyes brightened when they saw Su Liang.

Sixth Princess Duanmu Qianqian seemed listless. Su Liang didn’t know if it was because her best friend was in trouble or because her favorite Nian Jincheng was in trouble.

As soon as Man Ya appeared, she brought a burst of fragrance and walked straight towards Su Liang.

After exchanging a few polite greetings with Man Ya, Su Liang watched her sit down at the seat across from Duanmu Cheng.

They were only waiting for Duanmu Yi to arrive now.

They waited and waited, but he didn’t show up. Su Liang drank two cups of tea and finished eating two pieces of fruit from a plate, waiting for the dishes to be served.

Taking the opportunity of passing the fruit in front of him to Su Liang, Duanmu Chen whispered, “Nian Jincheng won’t be able to turn the situation around this time. Nian Ruting testified that Nian Jincheng personally said that he had been in contact with Gu Ling before he left the capital, and he knows where Gu Ling is hiding now..”

Chapter 157: 157. Already Engaged

Duanmu Chen smiled at the corner of his lips and returned to his seat.

Outsiders could only see that he was talking to Su Liang, but they didn’t know what was said. Subconsciously, they would think Duanmu Chen was interested in Su Liang and was showing his goodwill in public.

In this way, it caused some people who suspected that Su Liang and Duanmu Chen had known each other in Bei'an County to speculate.

If this were the case, given Duanmu Chen's personality, he should have avoided any suspicion.

Lian Shun whispered to Duanmu Che, "You see? If Su Liang were Duanmu

Chen's spy, why would he need to be so eager to please her and not get her married to the crown prince's mansion or enter the imperial harem to be able to help her?"

Duanmu Che hadn't mentioned the word "spy" since today's encounter between Su Liang and Mu Ya.

Hearing Lian Shun's words, Duanmu Che's thin lips tightened, his gaze sweeping over Su Liang, who was eating fruit, and quickly withdrew.

The fruit at the palace banquet was a tribute mandarin orange, with a yellowish color and almost the same size. Two were placed on each small table.

As Duanmu Che was about to take one, Lian Shun picked up the fruit plate, got up, and sent it to Su Liang as well.

"Su Xiaoliang, these are all for you," Lian Shun laughed. "They're produced in my hometown. Whenever you go there, I'll take you to pick the best ones!"

Su Liang didn't refuse, "Thanks."

There were many eyes around, and Lian Shun didn't say more, just returned to his seat.

Then, Crown Prince Duanmu Cheng had a palace maid send his tribute mandarins to Su Liang.

Seeing Duanmu Ao staring at Su Liang, the second prince's concubine, Mei Family, snorted, "She's really from the countryside, she looks like she's never seen the world before."

Su Liang was calm and composed, she didn't want to eat after the third one. In front of everyone, she put the remaining mandarins into her medicine box, intending to take them home for Ning Jing...

Duanmu Che's mouth twitched slightly, "What is she doing?"

Lian Shun laughed, "So cute!"

Duanmu Yi hadn't arrived yet, and Su Liang was thinking about the latest news that Duanmu Chen shared just now.

Nian Jincheng had always believed that Nian Ruxue was pure and kind-hearted. It was hard to say whether he really told Nian Ruxue about his contact with Gu Ling and where he knew he was.

But Nian Jincheng would never let anyone know where Gu Ling was, this could be determined.

The problem was, why did Nian Ruting betray, or even slander, Nian Jincheng? What was the benefit to her?

At first, Su Liang couldn't figure it out.

But she suddenly remembered the incident of Nian Ruxue hiring an assassin from Yanyun Building to kill Gu Ling.

Nian Jincheng and Ning Jing had explained that Nian Ruxue was just impulsive, trying to find Gu Ling by doing this, and wanted him to meet her.

It was hard for Su Liang not to think that there were similarities in the way Nian Ruxue and Nian Ruting, who were able to create the military exam substitute incident, acted.

So, was Nian Ruting trying to expose Nian Jincheng through betrayal, making the issue bigger, forcing Gu Ling to save Nian Jincheng, and incidentally, saving her?

After all, Nian Ruxue had run away, and Nian Ruting, with a broken leg, couldn't run. She was a direct participant in the cheating in the military exam, and if no one saved her, she would undoubtedly die.

On second thoughts, Su Liang considered another possibility.

Was it because Nian Jincheng didn't help Nian Ruting, and she hated him for it? Knowing that Nian Jincheng was the only one in the Nian Family who could save himself, she wanted to drag him down and die together?!

Today was the first time Su Liang met Nian Ruting, her judgment of her could only be based on her behavior on the combat stage, where she fought to win but also seriously injured and her willingness to be a substitute for Nian Ruxue, protecting her even when things were exposed.

Ignorant. Another one deceived by Nian Ruxue.

Selfish. Although she didn't know why she helped Nian Ruxue, she should know that cheating in the imperial examination was against fairness, not only unethical, but also a serious crime, but she clearly didn't care.

Even if Nian Ruting had no other purpose and only cared for her sister, it was no reason for her to disregard fairness and justice.

Individuals with difficulties can't achieve their goals by depriving others of opportunities and harming their interests.

Just like when Nian Ruxue was trapped by Duanmu Ao and chose to set up Su Liang to create an opportunity for herself to escape. She certainly had her own difficulties, but did Su Liang deserve to be unlucky?

But once Gu Ling was involved, as Duanmu Chen said, Nian Jincheng would be finished.

He would no longer have the chance to go to the border and make a new start, as he had originally planned.

After all, it was well known that he was Gu Ling's only friend. Even if Nian Ruting was slandering him, who would believe it?

As Su Liang was thinking and realizing that trouble was coming again, she heard someone shout, "His Majesty has arrived!"

Except for Yin Country's envoy Mu Ya, everyone else stood up and paid their respects.

Duanmu Yi's expression was calm, after he took his seat, he first welcomed Mu Ya and expressed Qian Country's willingness to consult with Yin Country for peace and exchanges.

But everyone knew that this was just a formality.

Peace is conditional and requires negotiation.

However, matters concerning interests would not be discussed openly in such a setting.

Su Liang, finding the cunning words of those in power boring, soon lost her focus and continued pondering Nian Jincheng's situation.

She was certain that Ning Jing would save him, but this time it might not be easy.

Duanmu Yi may not fully believe Nian Ruting's words, but he is likely to take advantage of the situation, using Nian Jincheng to lure out Gu Ling and kill him.

"Su Liang!" Xing Yusheng called her.

Su Liang looked up and found everyone's eyes on her, but she had no idea what had just happened.

Man Ya was all smiles, "Sister Su, just now I mentioned to Emperor Qian that you have no family left and are on your own. As the first female Martial Arts Champion of Qian Country, why not let you choose a husband and receive an Imperial Decree for marriage? Is there anyone here that you fancy?"

Su Liang: ...She knew that this Man Ya wasn't kind-hearted and meant no good.

She recalled that at today's banquet, Duanmu Cheng, Duanmu Chen, and Duanmu Che had all presented Su Liang with their tribute fruits. Man Ya must have seen this and thought it ripe for exploitation.

But how could she refuse the insignificant oranges sent by the princes? Refusing would seem pretentious.

Duanmu Yi smiled faintly, "Su Liang, General Mu's suggestion is good. What do you think?"

Just as Su Liang was considering how to decline, someone stood up...

It was the crown prince, Duanmu Cheng. He respectfully said, "Father, I am fond of Miss Su. Please, grant us marriage!"

Su Liang was tempted to roll her eyes: ...He already has a crown princess, and he wants to add her as a concubine?

Duanmu Yi chuckled, "Su Liang, what do you think?"

Su Liang still hadn't had a chance to speak when someone else stood up.

This time it was Duanmu Chen, "Father, I am also smitten with Miss Su and seek your permission for marriage."

Su Liang: ...Duanmu Chen's main wife's position was vacant, but she wasn't sure for a moment whether he wanted to help her get off the hook and disrupt Duanmu Cheng's proposal, or if he genuinely wanted to marry her.

The next moment, the third prince spoke up.

It was Duanmu Che, "Father, Miss Su healed me, and I have long since fallen for her. Please, grant us marriage!"

Lian Shun frowned incredulously, looking at Duanmu Che and doubting his own ears!

It was quite apparent that after Duanmu Che had spoken, Duanmu Yi's smile deepened a bit, "Che'er, why didn't you mention it sooner?"

Duanmu Yi did not conceal who he favored.

Duanmu Cheng's face darkened.

Duanmu Chen, on the other hand, remained expressionless as if nothing had happened.

As Duanmu Che was about to reply, Duanmu Ao spoke up, "Father, you granted Nian Ruxue to me as an Imperial Concubine before, but that didn't work out.

My position for Imperial Concubine is still vacant. If you want to grant Su

Liang a marriage, I should be first in line!"

Man Ya timely fanned the flames, "Sister Su is both talented and beautiful, it's only normal for her to have many admirers. Emperor Qian, why not let her choose one herself? Consider it a reward for Qian Country's first female Martial Arts Champion! "

Duanmu Che spoke again, but this time to Su Liang, "Miss Su, I was wrong about our previous misunderstanding. Please don't mind. I am sincere."

The way he said it sounded like they were a couple who had just had a lovers' quarrel...

Lian Shun sat there with his head down, lost in thought.

Although Duanmu Yi was quite satisfied with Su Liang, he could not naturally let her pick and choose among his sons. So he smiled, "I think Su Liang and

Che'er suit each other well."

Duanmu Che looked at Su Liang with enigmatic eyes.

Su Liang finally had a chance to speak. She stood up and respectfully said,

"Thank you for Your Majesty's grace, but I am already engaged."

Duanmu Yi's smile vanished, "Engaged to whom?"

"My adoptive brother, Ning Jing," Su Liang respectfully said. "I'm sorry for the misunderstanding, and thank the crown prince, Fourth Prince, and Fifth

Prince for their kindness."

Duanmu Che's face tightened, "Didn't you say you were merely sworn siblings? If so, why haven't you married yet?"

Su Liang replied calmly, "In fact, we are already married, but it was a hasty arrangement. At the time, I was not yet of age, and it was a fake marriage that took place when he assisted me in a crisis. It doesn't count. He said that after passing the Imperial examination, he would remarry me in a proper ceremony."

Duanmu Ao scoffed, "Father, I suspect she looks down on the Fifth Prince and is deliberately lying to evade marriage!"

Duanmu Yi's expression was indifferent, "Since there has been a misunderstanding, let someone bring Ning Jing to the palace."

Xing Yusheng felt uneasy in his heart. He knew very well that Su Liang and Ning Jing were not really engaged, but it was their friends who had hoped they would end up together.

Duanmu Yi favored Duanmu Che the most and treated him exceptionally, so he would not tolerate Su Liang's refusal.

If Ning Jing arrived later and his words did not match Su Liang's, she would have no choice but to accept marrying Duanmu Che as the Fifth Princess Consort in order not to be punished!

Chapter 158: 158. One condition

Originally a banquet for the Xunyang envoys to clear away the dust, Su Liang ended up being the focus.

And it was all because of the Xunyang envoy, Man Ya.

Someone had already been sent by imperial edict to invite Ning Jing to the palace, and as the dishes and wine were served, the sound of music and the clinking of cups filled the air, all seeming harmonious and warm.

It was all just a facade.

Duanmu Cheng, after failing to propose marriage, had his face return to normal, but the occasional glance he gave Su Liang was somewhat gloomy.

Duanmu Chen was seriously tasting the exquisite dishes, always wearing a faint smile, as if unaffected by the failed proposal.

Ever since Su Liang said she and Ning Jing were engaged, Duanmu Che's expression turned cold and never warmed up again.

Lian Shun, sitting next to him, drank in silence.

The two of them were sitting very close, but there seemed to be a sudden rift between the once-affectionate cousins.

Man Ya had already walked out of the shadow of today's contest defeat, her hearty laughter constantly resounding, and she was able to laugh with great sincerity when discussing the climate of Yin Country with Duanmu Yi.

Many people, instead of focusing on the beautiful zitherist, kept glancing at Su Liang intermittently.

But Su Liang was very calm, not just on the surface.

If she had any uneasiness at this moment, it was for Ning Jing's friend Nian Jincheng, not herself.

Xing Yusheng murmured to Su Liang, "When Ning Jing comes, you might be asked to leave the room."

"I know," Su Liang nodded, "It's okay."

After living with Ning Jing for so long, they naturally developed some mutual understanding. She believed in Ning Jing.

Even if the truth were indeed exposed and she were accused of deceiving the emperor, it was impossible for her to marry any prince because she had not come to the capital for a career, but to avenge the Su Family.

Participating in the Military Exam was just a means, not an end.

Thus, she could bear the consequences. The worst-case scenario would be to abandon her identity, her hard-earned rank, and go into hiding to investigate. It might even be better.

Xing Yusheng sighed softly. He was well aware of the power of the imperial authority.

Among the princes who had expressed interest in Su Liang today, Duanmu

Cheng had taken a fancy to Su Liang's Martial Arts Champion title. Duanmu Chen seemed to be joining the fun. Duanmu Ao had a clear grudge against Su Liang. Only Duanmu Che appeared to have sincere intentions.

It just so happened that Duanmu Che was Duanmu Yi's most beloved son...

Ning Jing arrived sooner than expected.

An old eunuch appeared ghostlike behind Su Liang at Duanmu Yi's side, inviting her to sit in the Side Palace.

"Alright, please lead the way, eunuch." Su Liang rose and followed him.

Everyone's eyes turned to the palace entrance.

A young eunuch led Ning Jing in, reported to Duanmu Yi, and said that Ning Jing was waiting outside the palace to take Su Liang home.

Ning Jing wore a plain, long robe, his face as beautiful as jade, his eyes clear and sinuous as Catherine Wheel, his posture straight, as if some immortal had descended into the mundane world.

After paying his respects, Duanmu Yi asked, "We heard that you and the current Martial Arts Champion Su Liang are sworn siblings?"

"Yes," Ning Jing nodded slightly.

Duanmu Yi smiled, "Just siblings then?"

Ning Jing hesitated for a moment, and some hearts in the room were lifted.

He said, "In fact, we are engaged, but have not yet married, so we called ourselves siblings."

Xing Yusheng let out a huge sigh of relief.

Duanmu Che's eyes darkened, gripping the teacup in his hand tightly.

Lian Shun hung his head with a self-mocking smile.

Man Ya's eyes sparkled, a smirk appearing on her face. Her goal had been achieved.

"Is there a token to prove it?" Duanmu Yi asked.

Ning Jing nodded gently, “Yes.”

As he spoke, he raised his left hand, pulled his sleeve down slightly, and revealed a fragrant wood hand string on his wrist. It was not too delicate, with small beads of various shapes: little stars, crescent moons, spheres, and cubes...

“This is the token Su Liang gave me, which she made by hand. She also wears the hand string I gave her, which I made by hand. Both hand strings are made from the same piece of fragrant wood,” Ning Jing replied respectfully.

Xing Yusheng: ...and they insist they’re not a couple?

The old eunuch stood at the entrance of the Side Palace, nodding to Duanmu Yi, indicating that he had confirmed that Su Liang had a fragrant wood hand string of the same material on her hand.

In fact, Ning Jing and Su Liang had more than just this matching item — they also had the wooden hairpins Nian Jincheng had given them.

But neither of them was wearing them.

Luckily, they hadn’t worn them. It would have been even more troublesome today if they had, as Man Ya would have recognized the wooden hairpins Nian Jincheng had bought at a glance.

And Nian Jincheng could not have friends unknown to others, or else that friend would definitely be suspected of being Gu Ling.

“When are you planning to get married?” Duanmu Yi’s smile faded.

Ning Jing replied, “She only had her hairpin ceremony at the end of last year, and we were both coming to the capital to take exams. We couldn’t attend to it right away, so we planned to choose an auspicious day in the second half of the year after the Imperial examination, and return to Xunyang City to get married.”

Duanmu Yi laughed, “A talented man and a beautiful woman, one excelling in literature and the other in martial arts — a perfect match.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Ning Jing said respectfully.

Duanmu Che’s heart sank, but Lian Shun raised his head and watched Su Liang returning from the Side Palace, exchanging glances with Ning Jing.

Lian Shun let out a long sigh, and a bit of resentment in his heart dissipated. However, there was still deep disappointment, not towards Su Liang but towards Duanmu Che beside him.

As the family member of the Martial Arts Champion, Duanmu Yi arranged seats for Ning Jing and himself next to Su Liang.

From the medicine box, Su Liang took out a golden-yellow tribute tangerine, peeled it, and handed it to Ning Jing.

Ning Jing naturally took it and put it in her mouth.

Xing Yusheng felt like his eyes were going blind. Did they really have to show off their love like this? Was it because his wife wasn’t here?

From beginning to end, Ning Jing and Su Liang didn't say a word, but anyone could see the affection and understanding between them, and their implicit feelings and tacit understanding made the two seem like they were in their own world.

The marriage drama came to an end like this.

Many people originally thought that Duanmu Yi would take advantage of the situation to grant marriage to Ning Jing and Su Liang, but he did not. After Ning Jing's arrival, Man Ya stopped provoking them.

By the end of the palace banquet, it was already very late.

Xing Ji and his son Xing Yusheng walked side by side in front, with Xing Yusheng occasionally glancing back at the two people behind them.

With a tangerine in her hand, Su Liang occasionally sniffed it, saying she liked the smell.

Ning Jing carried the medicine box and walked beside Su Liang. The two were not close, but their clothes occasionally brushed against each other.

"I thought you left." Su Liang said.

Ning Jing nodded, "I went to the restaurant for dinner." Then she came back to wait for Su Liang.

Su Liang didn't think much about it because Ning Jing had been protecting her all along, and they had discussed this matter earlier.

Ning Jing said that as long as Su Liang was with her, she would be responsible for Su Liang's safety.

Because their initial transaction was for Su Liang to work for Ning Jing.

Pushing Duanmu Che's wheelchair from behind, Lian Shun could see the silhouettes of Su Liang and Ning Jing in the distance.

"Cousin, I will return home tonight." Lian Shun's once warm attitude had turned cold.

Duanmu Che naturally knew why, and he frowned, "Do you believe me when I say I was only trying to help Su Liang avoid getting married to the crown prince and becoming an Imperial Concubine?"

Lian Shun shook his head, "I don't believe it. Compared to you, Duanmu Chen seems more like he wants to help Su Liang."

"Just because you said you were going to pursue her, does it mean I can't have any thoughts about her?" Duanmu Che asked coldly.

Lian Shun sighed softly, "Of course, you can have thoughts about her. But I

suddenly realized that you're a man without principles. Because you had prejudice against her, everything she did was wrong. Now that you're moved by her, she's suddenly perfect and there's no reason to doubt her? My cousin, I used to think you were overly cautious because you were born in the Royal Family, but in reality, you're conceited."

Duanmu Che's face darkened, "I'm not. Didn't you want me to abandon my prejudice against her? Why are you unsatisfied when I change?"

Lian Shun shook his head, "We're not talking about the same thing. Why did you change? Is it because you believe she can't possibly be a spy, or because you were dazzled by her enchanting figure on the Combat Stage and fell for her?"

"Does it matter why, as long as the result is the same?" Duanmu Che countered.

"You're really good at being lenient to yourself and strict with others." Lian Shun scoffed, "Where did that determination to stubbornly adhere to your view without evidence go? Considering Su Liang's true strength, shouldn't you be even more suspicious of her being a secretly trained spy? Is it not important whether or not she's a spy now, but what matters is getting her? If so, whether she was a spy or not initially wasn't important, what mattered more was your dislike for her and not wanting to see her, right?"

"You!" Duanmu Che's expression was furious, "Are you going to turn against me over a woman?"

The conversation reached the gates of the Imperial Palace.

Huang Bo and the carriage were waiting in the distance. Lian Shun pushed Duanmu Che over, looking listless. "When my grandfather passed away, he left me with a dying wish to take care of you. Every year, I spend at least three months in the capital city to accompany you, and another three months searching for famous doctors for you. You drove Su Liang away, and I brought her back, begging her to treat you.

"Cousin, today's incident happened suddenly, and I acted impulsively at the time. I hope you can understand." Duanmu Che frowned.

Not answering, Lian Shun lifted Duanmu Che from the wheelchair into the carriage but didn't get on. "I actually know you have your own means of self-preservation and aren't as frail as you seem. I once thought you needed a relative, but tonight I saw that your father loves you. Lin's Family has fallen, and I have no great ambitions, so I can't help you much. I should go home and be with my parents. Take care."

Huang Bo was stunned, but by the time he reacted, Lian Shun had already walked far away.

"Master, should I..." Huang Bo wanted to chase after him, but saw Duanmu Che's gloomy face.

"Everyone has their own aspirations, don't force it." Duanmu Che spoke coldly, "Let's go."

As they passed a carriage, Su Liang was seen standing nearby. Huang Bo took the initiative to greet her, "Miss Sul"

Upon hearing Huang Bo's voice, Su Liang didn't respond.

Puzzled, Huang Bo asked Duanmu Che what happened.

“Nothing, I was deceived by that woman.” Duanmu Che scoffed coldly.

As the carriage left the vicinity of the Imperial Palace and arrived in a secluded area, Su Liang sat in the spot closest to the door and spoke quietly to Ning Jing.

Of course, they were talking about Nian Jincheng.

As for their engagement and tokens of commitment, neither of them mentioned it again.

Ning Jing’s expression remained unchanged. “Have Yan Shiba save him.”

Su Liang paused for a moment, “Right, how could I forget about her? She came a few days ago and disappeared again. She should still be in the capital city. I’ll go to Huguo Temple tomorrow to see if she’s bothering Cheng Yun.”

Entering the Su family compound, Su Liang jumped off the carriage, and Ning Jing said, “If we really have to get married in the future, and I have to help you solve the problem again, you have to agree to one condition.”

Su Liang sighed slightly, “Alright. Whatever the Great God’s condition is, feel free to mention it. I’ll consider it. If it’s really not possible, I’ll run away.”

Ning Jing shook her head and tethered the horse, “I haven’t thought it through yet. Just owe it to me for now, and I’ll come to collect..”

Chapter 159: 159. A perfect match of top scholars in both literature and martial arts

As she entered, Su Liang suddenly thought, “Your palace exam is tomorrow, won’t it? Will our issues cause you to miss out on the Top Scholar position you should have gotten?”

On the surface, Duanmu Yi seemed magnanimous, not giving them trouble after asking for clarification.

But it was uncertain whether he would be fair to Ning Jing afterward.

The problem wasn’t with Duanmu Cheng, Duanmu Ao, or Duanmu Chen. It was Duanmu Yi’s most cherished Duanmu Che.

Ning Jing shook her head slightly, “I don’t know.”

Su Liang: ...Fine then.

When Su Liang was packing up and preparing to read for a while before going to bed, she heard movement in the courtyard.

Assuming it was Yan Shiba who had come to find her, and since she had something to discuss with Yan Shiba as well, she immediately put down the book and went out.

“Su Xiaoliang.” Lian Shun stood under the moon, his neat row of teeth shining white; the dark shadows couldn’t block the smile that appeared when he saw Su Liang.

But because of Duanmu Che’s words in the palace tonight, Su Liang guessed that Lian Shun might have come to apologize or act as a mediator? Afraid that she wouldn’t continue treating Duanmu

Che? So she asked indifferently, “What’s the matter?” Lian Shun sighed softly, “As expected, you’re still annoyed with me.” “It’s not you,” Su Liang said.

Lian Shun chuckled, “That’s good. You must never resent me because of my cousin’s actions. I am innocent!”

“What do you want at this late hour?” Su Liang asked again.

Lian Shun stood where he was and sighed, “I came to say goodbye to you. I’m going home. ”

Su Liang paused for a moment, “Is it because of tonight’s incident?”

Lian Shun nodded, “You can say that. I suddenly feel that running to the capital city was quite boring, probably the most foolish thing I’ve done in my life.”

Su Liang shook her head slightly, “Life is still long, don’t make conclusions too early.”

Lian Shun coughed lightly, “Would it be even more foolish in the future? Thank you, Su Xiaoliang!”

As they fell silent for a moment, Lian Shun glanced at Ning Jing’s room, which still had the lights on, and suddenly raised his voice to ask, “The engagement between you and Ning Jing is fake, right?”

‘Why do you say that?’ Su Liang countered.

Lian Shun laughed, “You said you were like siblings before, so I feel that you wouldn’t deceive me.”

Su Liang replied with a seemingly perfunctory but actually profound statement, “Think what you want.”

Lian Shun’s smile deepened, “Alright, then it’s true. But if you get tired of Ning Jing someday, consider me. Although I’m not as good-looking as Ning Jing, nor as wealthy and talented, but my family has an Orange Garden! You can eat as much as you like!”

Su Liang smiled, “Why don’t I just buy your family’s Orange Garden? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

Lian Shun held his forehead, “Not for sale!”

Ning Jing’s room door opened, and he came out, holding something in his hand.

“Xiao Jingjing, I’m leaving,” Lian Shun smiled.

Ning Jing walked up to him and handed over the object in his hand, “For you.”

Lian Shun froze, then saw it was a palm-sized wooden carving of an eagle, intricately carved with wings spread wide.

Lian Shun raised his eyebrows, “Did you make this? Not bad, I really like it, thank you! ”

Although he suspected that Ning Jing gifted it to discourage him from further attempts, he couldn’t continue pursuing Ning Jing now that he’d accepted the gift.

However, to be honest, despite their limited interactions, he quite liked Ning Jing’s character – indifferent but not cold, principled, and reasonable.

“Do you have a gift for me, Su Xiaoliang?” Lian Shun asked with a smile. Su Liang thought for a moment then shook her head, “No.”

Lian Shun: ...So, his true friend was Ning Jing. Su Xiaoliang was too disappointing!

Lian Shun took a step forward, hugged Ning Jing briefly, and let go, “I’m leaving. Su Xiaoliang, you must protect my friend Xiao Jingjing well!”

Obviously, his words were sarcastic.

Su Liang nodded, “I’ll do my best.”

Watching Lian Shun’s figure disappear into the night, Su Liang sighed,

“Duanmu Che is such a dog!”

Ning Jing shook her head, “Don’t insult dogs.”

“Could there be someone who wants to kill you and steal me as their wife?” Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing nodded, “I’m really looking forward to it.”

Su Liang expressed that Great God Ning hadn’t killed anyone for a while, and his hands were itchy. It was understandable.

The day after the Military Exam.

Two explosive pieces of news spread throughout the capital city.

First, the newly crowned Martial Arts Champion, Su Liang, was already engaged, and her fiancée was none other than her sworn brother, Ning Jing, the head of the tea merchant Ning Family from Xunyang.

Second, Nian Jincheng, the number one young general in Qian Country and the second son of the Nian Family, was still secretly colluding with the treacherous rebel Gu Ling.

As for the Crown Prince and several other princes proposing marriage to Su Liang at the palace banquet, that news had not leaked, indicating that someone was suppressing the information.

Su Liang suspected that the biggest possibility was the Crown Prince Duanmu Cheng.

Today was the Imperial examination for the Civil Examinations, and it wouldn’t be long before they knew whether Ning Jing could be the Top Scholar.

During the previous scholar examination, all the adult princes, besides the seriously ill Duanmu Che, had taken a test in the palace, but the results were kept secret.

After breakfast, Su Liang drove the carriage to send Ning Jing to the palace for the examination, because Ning Jing had sent her last night. Afterward, Su Liang headed toward Huguo Temple.

So, the news quickly spread.

The Martial Arts Champion personally drove the carriage to deliver her fiancée to the palace, and then went to Huguo Temple to pray for the Buddha’s blessing on Ning Jing becoming the Top Scholar.

What a scene of “The Martial Arts Champion Pampering Her Husband” that would make others envious.

Xing Yusheng went out and heard everyone talking about Su Liang and Ning Jing, finding it very amusing.

He went to the Lin Family to pick up Lin Xueqing to go to the Duke Mansion, and was stopped by Lin Shuzhi, who asked him what happened in the palace last night.

After Xing Yusheng finished speaking, Lin Shuzhi couldn’t help but laugh and cry, “These two kids, why don’t they just get married earlier.”

Xing Yusheng listened and knew that his father-in-law shared his feelings. Although it looked real, the engagement between those two was mostly fake.

If it was true, there was no reason their closest friends didn’t know anything about it until yesterday. Moreover, every time they tried to bring Ning Jing and Su Liang together, the two of them always found ways to dodge.

“This time, getting married is different from when they were in the small village. Soon, the whole world will know. Unless they both abandon their current identities, they will be husband and wife,” Xing Yusheng smiled. “Even if they’re not together, no third person can affect their relationship. Just let it

“

Lin Shuzhi nodded, “That’s true. I hope Jingjing has a smooth day today.”

Xing Yusheng and Lin Xueqing were about to leave when they saw Lin Bojun rushing back from outside.

“Second brother, where did you go early in the morning?” Lin Xueqing asked. Lin Bojun sighed deeply, “I went to inquire about General Nian’s situation.”

Lin Xueqing frowned, “His sister suddenly betrayed him; could it be a baseless slander? If he really had contact with Gu Ling, wouldn’t the Nian Family’s crime be even greater?”

Being implicated in rebellion would be much more serious than cheating in the Imperial Examination.

Xing Yusheng sighed lightly, “I also think that Nian Family’s fifth sister is crazy, making up things out of thin air. Nian Jincheng is an anomaly in the Nian Family and probably the only upright person among them. They just can’t stand to see him prosper.”

In fact, Xing Yusheng didn’t want to speak in favor of Nian Jincheng, but he cared more about Gu Ling, who had once saved his mother. He believed that Gu Ling could become friends with Nian Jincheng, which already showed Nian Jincheng’s character.

Lin Bojun’s face was solemn, “But in such a matter, even if there’s no evidence, the court will not let it go. Moreover, General Nian and Gu Ling used to have close contacts. Now there are rumors outside that General Nian volunteered to pursue Gu Ling last year, but in fact, he did so to let Gu Ling escape. He was originally imprisoned with the Nian Family in the Heavenly Prison, but now, no one knows where he was taken for interrogation.”

Xing Yusheng said seriously, "Second Brother, you know General Nian's character from working with him. But with this matter, it's best not to get involved."

Xing Yusheng did not want the Lin Family to be blackmailed, for if they got into trouble, the Xing Family would not be able to protect them.

Especially Lin Bojun, who was a military commander.

Rebellion from military commanders with soldiers in their hands was the most feared by the court. That's why this time, Nian Jincheng would find it hard to escape blame.

"I understand." Lin Bojun nodded, "You guys don't have to worry about that. Go and have fun."

Su Liang went alone to Huguo Temple, not to pray for Ning Jing to become the top scholar as rumored, but to look for Yan Shiba.

Last time she didn't talk much with Cheng Yun, so Su Liang didn't know where to find him, so she asked a little monk.

"Master Cheng Yun is sorting scriptures in the Scripture Pavilion," the little monk said.

Cheng Yun was young, but his master had a high status, so many young monks in Huguo Temple had to call him master.

Su Liang followed the direction given by the little monk and headed to Huguo Temple's Scripture Pavilion.

She saw a seven-story tower from a distance and after walking around for a while, she finally arrived at the courtyard outside the Scripture Pavilion, where an old monk stopped her.

"Benefactor, this is a forbidden area of Huguo Temple," the old monk said.

Su Liang nodded, "I want to see Master Cheng Yun. I heard he's in the Scripture Pavilion, can you help me call him out?"

Seeing the old monk frown, Su Liang explained, "He once helped me, and I am here to thank him."

"Please wait here, benefactor," the old monk replied.

After waiting for about a quarter of an hour, Su Liang saw Cheng Yun come out following the old monk.

"Amitabha." Cheng Yun put his palms together, "What brings you here, Benefactor Su?"

Su Liane also put her palms together, "Master Cheng Yun, may I have a word with you?"

Cheng Yun greeted the old monk and took Su Liang to Huguo Temple's

Vegetarian Hall, "Benefactor Su can take some vegetarian dishes home."

"Good. I came today to ask you something. Has anyone come looking for you lately?" Su Liang asked.

Cheng Yun was stunned, "Do you mean Miss Yan Jiujiu?"

Cheng Yun had saved Yan Shiba by chance, and Yan Shiba claimed to be Yan Jiujiu, letting Cheng Yun send her to Su Liang's home.

Su Liang nodded, "So she's come to see you?"

Cheng Yun sighed softly, "Please advise Miss Yan if you see her again not to pester me anymore, as I am a monk."

Su Liang: ... Not surprised at all.

"When did she come to see you? What did she say?" Su Liang asked. "Five days ago. She spoke some nonsense." Cheng Yun looked a little helpless.

"Only once?" Su Liang asked.

Cheng Yun frowned and glanced at Su Liang, "Yes, she only came once."

Su Liang coughed lightly, "I have no other intentions, just looking for her but don't know where she's gone."

"How did Benefactor Su know that Miss Yan would come looking for me?" Cheng Yun asked.

Su Liang said seriously, "The last time I saw her, she said she wanted to thank you in person for saving her life."

Cheng Yun shook his head, and didn't say anything.

When they reached the Vegetarian Hall, Su Liang asked for some dishes that she had eaten and liked before, planning to take them away.

"If she comes to see you again, please help me tell her that I am looking for her," Su Liang said, and then she picked up the vegetarian dishes and bid farewell to Cheng Yun.

As she took a carriage down the mountain, Su Liang went to wait for Ning Jing outside the palace.

It's just to repay Ning Jing for waiting for her last night, with no ulterior motives.

However, her every move now attracts much attention.

So, a new episode was added to the 'Martial Arts Champion Cherishing Husband Chronicles' – "Silently Waiting".

This contrasted greatly from Su Liang's fierce and overbearing presence on the Combat Stage yesterday, making people exclaim, she really spoils him!

When the palace gate opened again, it was already in the afternoon.

Su Liang sat in the carriage, eating some cold vegetarian dishes, and took a short rest.

Ning Jing walked out of the palace gate and immediately saw her own carriage.

She walked over, thinking nobody was there, and opened the curtain to see Su Liang leaning against the carriage wall with her eyes closed as if asleep.

“It’s over?” Su Liang opened her eyes and asked hastily upon seeing Ning Jing, “How did it go?”

“Take a guess.” Ning Jing replied.

With a light chuckle, Su Liang replied, “If you’re asking me to guess, I’d say you’re the top scholar.”

Ning Jing nodded to indicate Su Liang had guessed correctly.

Although the imperial examination was presided over by Duanmu Yi, with the presence of many great scholars for evaluation and princes also in attendance, there was no controversy about Ning Jing being the top scholar. It was because she was so thoughtful and eloquent, her debates with the great scholars being scintillating as well.

“That’s great!” Su Liang sighed in relief, “I was worried that I might have ruined your chances of becoming the top scholar.”

She simply assumed becoming the top scholar was Ning Jing’s rightful title, and if she hadn’t won it, that would mean there was some conspiracy. Su Liang drove the carriage, with Ning Jing joining her as they returned home together.

Duanmu Chen pushed Duanmu Che’s wheelchair out of the palace, and they saw this scene unfold.

Duanmu Chen said with a warm smile, “Our fifth brother actually met Su Liang before I did. But alas, when it comes to fate, it’s impossible to predict.”

With a stony expression, Duanmu Che asked, “Do you like her, fourth brother?”

Duanmu Chen nodded, “Yes, I do. But it seems she only has eyes for Ning Jing.”

After the news of Ning Jing becoming the top scholar spread, “Martial Arts Champion Dotes on Her Husband” transformed into “A Perfect Match Between the Civil and Martial Arts Champions,” and became a widely known story.

In the afternoon, friends came to their house to offer congratulations, only to find martial arts champion Su Liang with an apron on, baking adorable little cookies.

It wasn’t until late at night that their friends dispersed, with Zhengzheng taking a box of cookies with them. The remaining cookies were for Ning Jing.

While reading in the evening, Ning Jing glanced up and saw a plate of crescent-shaped cookies, even though she had told Su Liang she preferred star-shaped ones...

Late at night, just as Su Liang was about to sleep, the window suddenly opened. Turning her head, she heard Yan Shiba’s affected voice, “Liang Sis— Big Sis is here—”

Su Liang let Yan Shiba embrace her, “Sis Liang, I heard from Yunyun that you were looking for me? What’s the matter? Did you miss me?”

Speechless, Su Liang replied, “So you’ve gone to see Cheng Yun again.”

Yan Shiba huffed, “I was almost beaten by that old monk guarding the door! How infuriating! ”

Su Liang thought Yan Shiba wouldn't go so far as to hurt or kill anyone at Huguo Temple, so it was good that Cheng Yun had someone to protect him. Otherwise, he would have been devoured by this demoness.

“Ugh! Helping you fulfill your request has been quite the rollercoaster! I thought Nian Jincheng would know something since he's Gu Ling's only friend.

But before I could find him after he returned to the capital, he got captured! Such a disappointment!” Yan Shiba was furious, “If Nian Jincheng was in the Heavenly Prison, I would have rescued him tonight! According to the recent information, he's very likely to be imprisoned somewhere in the Imperial Palace! I have to find out more!”

Su Liang: ... That was unexpected good fortune. She looked for Yan Shiba to help with precisely this matter, but Yan Shiba had already planned on rescuing Nian Jincheng herself. The goal? To find Gu Ling?

So, this would count as Yan Shiba repaying Su Liang the life-saving favor she had done her earlier.

With this in mind, Su Liang didn't need to ask her for help anymore.

“By the way, Liang Sis, what did you want to discuss? Hurry up and tell me! Once we're done talking, I'll go take a stroll at the Imperial Palace!” Yan Shiba asked.

With a slight sigh, Su Liang said, “I'm engaged to Ning Jing now. Should we just forget about finding Gu Ling?”

Yan Shiba suddenly jumped up, “What? You're engaged to that Ning brat? Really? How dare he take advantage of your absence to make a move on you! I'll go and chop him up now!”

“You won't be able to beat him.” Su Liang stopped Yan Shiba.

Yan Shiba snorted, “I promised you that I'd do it, so it's not like me to go back on my word! I will find Gu Ling for sure, so you can dump Ning Jing later! This is not negotiable! I'm going now! You wait for my good news!”

“Wait!” Su Liang added,

With a mischievous grin, Yan Shiba suddenly leaned in close to Su Liang's face and said, “So you grew up in the capital and met Gu Ling long ago? And you didn't ask me to find him just because people said he was handsome—you like him, don't you?!”

With a nod, Su Liang blinked, “You found out.”

Yan Shiba tousled Su Liang's hair, “Don't worry. I'll make sure to find him for you..”

Chapter 160: One move, two gains

Daybreak arrived, and Yan Shiba did not come again.

People from the palace came and informed Ning Jing and Su Liang that the court would host the Enrong Banquet to entertain the new scholars the next day, and each of them received an invitation.

In the past, the banquets held after the civil and military exams were always separate, but according to the time and location on the invitation, this time they would be held together.

“Will they ask you civil scholars to recite poetry on the spot?” Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing nodded, “Yes. And you military scholars will have to demonstrate your martial skills for fun.”

Su Liang was very calm, “Let’s do it, I like it.”

After the finals of the military exam and the imperial civil examination, Ning Jing did not go to give Duanmu Che acupuncture again for two days, and Su Liang even less so.

At noon that day, Huang Bo, the housekeeper of the Fifth Prince’s Mansion, came to visit.

“My master would like to invite Miss Su to our mansion for a talk.” Seeing Su Liang, Huang Bo was very polite.

It was fine weather, and Su Liang was sitting in the courtyard playing with the medicinal materials, then she turned her head and asked Ning Jing’s room,

“Jing Gege, can I go?”

Upon hearing the words “Jing Gege”, Huang Bo’s mouth twitched.

The next moment, Ning Jing came out of his room, “If the Fifth Prince has anything to say, he can talk to me. Let’s go.”

Huang Bo looked a little embarrassed, “Miss Su, this...”

“No matter what it is, it’s the same whether he talks to me or her.” Su Liang lowered her head to pound the medicine.

Huang Bo nodded, “Alright, then please follow me, Young Master Ning.”

As Ning Jing walked to the entrance of the courtyard, Su Liang suddenly said, “Please help me buy a new mortar when you come back, this one is not good.” “Mm.” Ning Jing didn’t look back, and he stepped out of the door.

When they arrived at the Fifth Prince’s Mansion and saw Duanmu Che, they were by the Garden Lake in the backyard.

Willow trees had sprouted buds, and the lake was also covered with a light green hue. Duanmu Che sat in a wheelchair, facing the lake, with a falcon on his shoulder.

“Master, I brought ...”

Huang Bo’s words were interrupted by Duanmu Che, “Su Liang, I thought you would never come again.”

Huang Bo’s face was very awkward, “Master, Miss Su was busy and didn’t come, but Young Master Ning is here.”

Duanmu Che’s face suddenly turned cold, and he still didn’t look back; he waved away the person behind him.

Huang Bo then retreated.

Then, Duanmu Che turned his wheelchair around, his face had returned to calm, and his eyes fell on Ning Jing, snorting coldly, "What, don't dare to let her come, afraid I'll do something to her?"

Ning Jing's gaze shifted down, landed on Duanmu Che's legs, and asked indifferently, "What can you do?" Duanmu Che's face stiffened, "Are you mocking me?"

"Yes." Ning Jing nodded slightly.

Duanmu Che sneered, "How bold! Just because you got the title of Top Scholar, you think you're so capable?"

"You try it if you're so capable." Ning Jing's face was calm.

The relationship between the two of them had been bad from the beginning, and there was a time when Lian Shun was mediating in the middle, so they ignored each other and had no trouble.

Now, Duanmu Che's proposal to marry Su Liang was rejected, while Ning Jing and Su Liang became engaged, so this meeting, Duanmu Che was not polite, and neither did Ning Jing give him any face; they directly tore each other's faces.

"With just one word, I can make everything you've worked for vanish, do you believe it?" Duanmu Che said coldly.

Ning Jing shook his head slightly, "I don't believe it. The emperor is wise, and no matter how much he favors you, he will not confuse right and wrong."

Duanmu Che scoffed, "You're too naive!"

"Do you really like Su Liang?" Ning Jing suddenly asked. Duanmu Che nodded, "So what if I do?"

"Tell her what she wants to know." Ning Jing said.

Duanmu Che sneered, "Fine, as long as she marries me, we can discuss anything she wants."

"Is this your love?" Ning Jing looked at Duanmu Che, his eyes devoid of any warmth, "You don't care what she needs or consider her feelings at all, you just want to satisfy your own desires."

"Don't pretend to be so noble, is it wrong to want to get what you love?" Duanmu Che asked coldly.

"Yes. So she doesn't like you, and if you harass her again, as her fiancé, I think you're shameless, is that okay?" Ning Jing retorted.

"Ning, Jing!" Duanmu Che gritted his teeth, "You're courting death!"

"Fifth Prince, respect is mutual. In light of the fact that you saved her before, I could let go of the past, but please stay away from her in the future." Ning Jing finished speaking and turned to leave.

Duanmu Che's face darkened, "Huang Bo, stop him!"

Huang Bo appeared and blocked Ning Jing's way, "Young Master Ning, my master still has something to say."

"Fine." Ning Jing turned around and walked towards Duanmu Che again.

The falcon flapped its wings and flew away; Ning Jing walked up to Duanmu Che, raised his foot, and kicked one of the wheelchair wheels...

The wheelchair slid backwards, Duanmu Che's face changed, he tried to get up, but was pushed by Ning Jing.

Huang Bo rushed over in shock and panic!

By the time Huang Bo had rescued Duanmu Che from the water, there was no trace of Ning Jing to be found.

Duanmu Che coughed violently, his face pale, "I want to see Father in the palace!"

Not long after Ning Jing returned home, Duanmu Chen arrived, bringing an old eunuch and several guards from the palace, questioning him by imperial order.

"Fifth Prince said that you treated him with disrespect, deliberately pushing him into the water and almost causing him to drown. What do you have to say about this?" Duanmu Chen asked coldly.

Ning Jing frowned slightly, "The Fifth Prince fell into the water? I didn't know about it. Today, the Fifth Prince sent his housekeeper to invite me to his mansion for a talk, but when I arrived, the Fifth Prince demanded that I break off my engagement with Su Liang, otherwise he would make all my efforts disappear. I did not agree and took my leave, not knowing what happened afterwards."

A glint flashed in Duanmu Chen's eyes, and he frowned, "Young Master Ning, as the Top Scholar of this year's exam, you should be very clear about the consequences of hurting a prince and deceiving the emperor, right?"

Ning Jing nodded, "Yes, every word of mine is true, with no falsehood."

Duanmu Chen looked at the old eunuch, "Eunuch Min, should we inform Father Emperor first about this?"

The old eunuch nodded, "Fourth Prince can make the decision."

Duanmu Chen left with his men.

Seeing Ning Jing heading back to his room, Su Liang stopped him, "Did you push Duanmu Che into the water?"

Ning Jing turned back, "Why couldn't it be him deliberately falling into the water to frame me?"

Su Liang's lips curled, "Because when you were explaining to Duanmu Chen just now, I saw your little finger move."

Ning Jing was slightly taken aback and looked at his pinkies on both hands.

He then heard Su Liang continue, "After a long time of observation, I can confirm that when you lie, your right little finger will move."

Ning Jing pinched his right pinky, "Thanks for the reminder, it won't happen again."

Su Liang: ...Why did I reveal the secret I just discovered?

"It was me who pushed him." Ning Jing admitted.

Su Liang gave a snicker, gave a thumbs up, and said, "Great God, you're so brave to plot against a prince in broad daylight!"

Ning Jing's expression was indifferent, "The Emperor knows he's coveting you, and it was him who invited me over. Whatever happens to him could be an intentional trap for me."

"Amazing, really amazing!" Su Liang expressed that he didn't expect the Great God Ning to have this side of him. He didn't like playing dirty, but that didn't mean he couldn't. To deal with someone shady like Duanmu Che, this was the way to go.

After the incident, Su Liang realized that Duanmu Che only helped Su Yuanzhou's family and spared Su Liang's life because he thought he was bestowing grace upon ants. He was a conceited person who couldn't be judged simply by good or bad, but his mentality was somewhat flawed.

Su Liang was not worried that Duanmu Yi would do anything to Ning Jing because of Duanmu Che's accusations.

Duanmu Yi loved Duanmu Che the most, but held Duanmu Chen in the highest esteem. This was inseparable from Duanmu Chen's outstanding performance over the past year.

Last time when Duanmu Ao was beaten by Su Liang, Duanmu Chen was in charge of the investigation.

This time Duanmu Che fell into the water, Duanmu Yi asked Duanmu Chen to inquire about the matter, or perhaps, Duanmu Chen took the initiative to take on the task.

No matter the case, Duanmu Chen would not really side with Duanmu Che, and would only use this opportunity to smear Duanmu Che's name in front of Duanmu Yi without leaving a trace.

The outcome of the matter was just as Su Liang had expected.

In the end, Duanmu Yi believed Ning Jing's words, thinking that Duanmu Che couldn't let go of Su Liang and wanted to get rid of Ning Jing using this method.

No matter how Duanmu Che defended himself, the only witness was his closest confidant, Huang Bo, who held no credibility.

"Father Emperor, Fifth Brother took quite a liking to a girl and was momentarily unwilling to accept her marriage to someone else, it's just human nature." Duanmu Chen "kindly" helped Duanmu Che explain.

Although Duanmu Yi was somewhat dissatisfied with Duanmu Che, he didn't blame him. He spoke to Duanmu Chen and Duanmu Che, "Chen'er, Che'er, both of you should get married. If you have any preferences among the young ladies, just tell me."

Duanmu Chen was dumbfounded for a moment before respectfully replying,

“Your son obeys Father Emperor.”

Duanmu Yi was very satisfied, and turned towards Duanmu Che, “Forget about Su Liang. Nian Jincheng is not clean and cannot be used. There are not many useful young generals these days. I want to see Su Liang’s abilities and consider whether to use her heavily. If she really fights for Qian Country, how can she bear children for you? It’s inappropriate.”

Truthfully, Duanmu Chen was a little bitter inside. It was only in front of Duanmu Che that Duanmu Yi slightly resembled a father.

“I don’t care about all those things, I just want her!” Duanmu Che said with a gloomy face.

Duanmu Chen never dared to speak to Duanmu Yi like this.

Duanmu Yi frowned, “Don’t be stubborn! As a dignified prince, do you want to snatch someone else’s wife?”

“Their engagement is fake! They put on an act to deceive us!” Duanmu Che said.

Duanmu Chen’s eyes flickered. Although he had doubts about this too, it didn’t really matter. He believed that even if Su Liang and Ning Jing didn’t intend to get married now, when the time came for them to want to marry, they would be the first and best choice for each other.

Duanmu Chen had had feelings for Su Liang before, but he never considered matters of love, so he could always remain rational.

Comparatively, Duanmu Che seemed a bit spoiled.

Duanmu Yi’s face darkened, “Che’er, if you can’t provide evidence, don’t make baseless judgments. Since both of you have no preferences, I will arrange for you to select brides! Go back!”

“Choosing brides? What if the emperor’s choice turns out to be someone the master doesn’t like?” Chang’an worried.

Duanmu Chen’s expression was relaxed, “As long as she has a high enough background, her family can support me, she’s good-looking, and well-behaved, I won’t have any dislikes.”

Chang’an thought hard for a long time, “It doesn’t sound like much to ask for, but when I think about it, I can’t recall a young lady who fits the bill.”

“Actually, I quite like the young lady from Duke Qin’s mansion.” Duanmu Chen said.

Chang’an’s eyes lit up, “That’s right, Miss Qin is very suitable! She’s good friends with Miss Su, too! She must have a good personality!”

Duanmu Chen scoffed, “Go tell Su Liang that Father Emperor is arranging brides for me and Duanmu Che.”

Chang’an nodded, “Should I ask Miss Su to pass on the message to Miss Qin that the master fancies her?”

Duanmu Chen shook his head, “No, tell her to pass it on to the Lin Family. If they want to marry into the Qin Family, they should hurry. I don’t want another incident like Lin Xueqing and Xing Yusheng, it makes me lose face.” Chang’an was dumbfounded, “I don’t understand, Master means...?”

“You tell Su Liang, she’ll understand.” Duanmu Chen said, “Father Emperor wants to use her heavily, so she should try harder. I sincerely want to befriend her, and she owes me a favor, which she must return!”

When Su Liang saw Chang’an and learned that Duanmu Chen and Duanmu Che were going to select brides, she specifically mentioned Qin Yujin, and she knew exactly what to do.

Ning Jing paid a visit to the Lin Family, and in the afternoon, Lin Shuzhi invited Xing’s old lady as a matchmaker to propose marriage to Qin Yujin on behalf of Lin Bojun. The Qin Family immediately agreed.

At night, someone came from the palace with Duanmu Yi’s verbal order for Su Liang, commanding her to take responsibility for treating Duanmu Che from tomorrow onwards and not to slack off.

Su Liang had no choice but to obey.

Seeing that she was unhappy, Ning Jing said, “I’ll go with you. If he speaks rudely once, I’ll hit him once, and tell the Emperor that he’s hurting himself to frame me.”

Su Liang coughed lightly, “If this kind of thing happens multiple times, no one will believe it. Are you sure you just want to hit him because your hands are itching?”

“Yes, is that not allowed?” Ning Jing countered.

Su Liang nodded, “It’s totally allowed. However, the problem with Duanmu Che isn’t that big. Your brother is still suffering, shouldn’t you think about how to save him first? You can’t completely rely on Yan Shiba, right? The procrastination might cost him a layer of skin.”

Ning Jing furrowed his brows, thought for a moment, and said, “Next time Yan

Shiba comes, you suggest her to capture Duanmu Che and exchange him for

Nian Jincheng. In this way, both goals can be achieved.”

Su Liang gave a thumbs up again, “Great God, you’re really clever..”