

Three-Time 26

Chapter 26

[Starting a Fight] The early morning sun had just risen. Su Liang had just opened the door when old lady Bai came over with her basket. Recently, the Bai family had gotten some accidental income and there was hope that Zhuzi's condition might improve, which had eased old lady Bai's furrowed brows somewhat. "Li, I just picked some wild vegetables. I know you like them, want some?" Su Liang invited Old Lady Bai in and took a handful of fresh wild vegetables to the kitchen. Seeing the kitchen all tidy and in order, old lady Bai praised Su Liang as a domesticated woman. But really, Su Liang just cooked. Washing dishes, tidying, and cleaning were all Ning Jing's jobs. As Old lady Bai was chatting, she brought up Su Xingzhe's family, "You wouldn't know since you didn't leave the house, but something big happened to old lady Niu's family last night!" Gossip seemed to be in the nature of women. Su Liang played ignorant and seeing her interest, Old Lady Bai launched into her story. "Old lady Niu's eldest son had always been in poor health. He was newly married, but lost his life in less than a month without leaving a son or a daughter. In my opinion, the young daughter-in-law, who hasn't given birth yet, should go back to her natal home and find someone else to marry. Why must she be condemned to live a widow's life?" "Old lady Niu just wouldn't let Liu Huilan leave. She makes her serve the entire family and beats and scolds her every day. The things she says, they are truly filthy! If my daughter were treated like this, I would have my son knock on their door! You can't bully people like this! All of this just because they have a scholar in their family and no one dares to offend them!" "And guess what? Last night, their wall collapsed, the pig ran away, the chicken flew away, and there was even a fire! Not a single person was seen! People are saying it's haunted!" "Just now when I was picking vegetables and I passed by their house, the pigs still haven't been found. I think Old Granny Niu will definitely invite a Taoist priest to cast out the evil spirits!" Without quite deriving pleasure from her misfortune, Old Granny Bai was, at least, able to vent some of her anger. Bai He had studied in the town's school with Su Xingzhe. But after Zhuzi was born weak and frequently sick, requiring constant medication, which the Bai family could not afford, Bai He had to drop out of school. Ever since then, old lady Niu frequently put Old lady Bai down and her sharp, sarcastic character had earned her deep resentment from Old lady Bai. Old lady Bai had always felt that her younger son, Bai He, was smart and had the makings of a scholar. However, due to their family's financial situation, they couldn't afford to keep him in school which caused her great distress. On a few occasions, when Old lady Niu made sarcastic remarks publically, Old lady Bai had nearly lost her patience and rushed over to shut her filthy mouth! "Maybe it really is haunted." Su Liang said seriously, "Does our village have a Taoist priest?" Old lady Bai shook her head, "Our village doesn't, but the town does." "Is it effective?" asked Su Liang. Old lady Bai lightly scoffed, "That's just an old con artist who cheats money away from people!" A light bulb went on in Su Liang's head as she figured out a way to help Liu Huilan escape her bitter life... A rescue should not be aborted half-way. If Liu Huilan doesn't leave the old lady Niu's house, the tragic events of last night will sooner or later repeat themselves. Having shared the most explosive gossip in the village with Su Liang, Old lady Bai, quite satisfied, left with her basket. "Can I borrow one of your clothes?" Su Liang came in and asked Ning Jing. Ning Jing didn't ask what she needed it for and took out a green changpao. Su Liang tried it on, but it was too big. "It's yours." Ning Jing said. "Thanks." Su Liang took the clothes back to her room, and after some simple tailoring, the outfit fit just right. The next time Ning Jing saw Su Liang, she was in male attire with her hair rolled up in a bun. A girl yet to have her hairpinning ceremony, she

resembled a twelve or thirteen-year-old boy at first glance. Su Liang also took a straw hat from Ning Jing's room—it was left behind by Uncle Liang. "I'm going to town, do you need me to buy anything?" Su Liang asked. Ning Jing shook his head, "No." "If Qi Jun comes to pick me up, tell him to wait a while." As Su Liang finished speaking, she was already stepping out with bright and brisk steps. There was a shorter path from the village to the town, which Bai Peng had shown to Su Liang. The path was narrow, suitable neither for carriage nor for carrying loads, so it was not frequently used by others. Taking the shortcut, Su Liang reached Feiyan Town very quickly. After asking people for directions, she found the old Taoist priest who usually set up his stall at the intersection. The Taoist priest was in ragged clothes, but his eyes sparkled with life. Su Liang kept her straw hat low, revealing only her pointed chin, and got straight to the point, "Today, if someone from Su Village comes to ask the priest to cast a spell, the priest must tell them that the widowed daughter-in-law and the younger brother-in-law are in clash due to their zodiac signs, and they need to be separated with great distance." "I never lie." The Taoist priest scoffed lightly. Su Liang took out a silver coin, "Priest, they truly are in clash." The Taoist priest's eyes lit up and he quickly snatched the silver coin, stuffing it into his chest, flicking his duster, "Young master, rest assured, I will have a good look." Not long after, a man hurried over to invite the old Taoist priest, and they headed in the direction of Su's Village. ... Su Liang cut a chunk of fresh meat, bought some miscellaneous grains and condiments, and with her basket, prepared to take the shortcut home. Before she could leave Feiyan Town, a carriage pulled up beside her. "Miss Su?" Hearing Xing Yusheng's voice, Su Liang stopped and saw Qi Jun driving the carriage, with another guard, Qi Yan, who looked similar to him sitting beside him. The two were biological brothers. Xing Yusheng sat in the carriage, looking at her in surprise. "It really is Miss Su!" Qi Jun laughed and said, "When the Crown Prince said you looked alike, I didn't even recognize you!" "You guys are... going to my house?" Su Liang asked. "I always bother you to come over to treat me and I feel bad about it. I also wanted to get out and see the world." Xing Yusheng explained. Su Liang nodded and got on the carriage. "Ning Jing didn't come?" Xing Yusheng looked at Su Liang's outfit which seemed to be similar to Ning Jing's, but smaller. After taking off the straw hat, she looked just like a handsome, jade-faced young man. "He's at home." said Su Liang, "The color on Crown Prince Xing's face has improved over the past few days." "All thanks to you." Xing Yusheng said formally, "When you're out on your own, disguising as a male is indeed more convenient, but you still need to be extra cautious." Su Liang understood that Xing Yusheng had misunderstood, but she didn't bother to explain. Xing Yusheng then took out a refined jade token and handed it to Su Liang, "Ning Jing's exam in Bei'an County is all set. Just bring my token when it's time to go. Whether he passes or not will depend on his own abilities." "Many thanks." Su Liang accepted. The carriage rolled through the village, passing Su Xingzhe's home, which was crowded with onlookers. Seeing Su Liang draw back the curtains to look outside, Xing Yusheng asked, "Is this house celebrating something happy today?" Su Liang nodded, "Yes, it's a joyful affair." ... The carriage stopped. Su Liang was the first to alight and she saw Ning Jing standing at the entrance of the house, looking right at them. By the time Xing Yusheng was seated in the wheelchair with the assistance of Qi Jun and Qi Yan, Su Liang had already briskly walked towards Ning Jing, handing him both the basket and the jade token. Xing Yusheng withdrew his gaze and took in the surroundings. This place was even more rustic and authentic than Qiuming Manor. The Ning's house was nothing extraordinary, it looked like an ordinary household in the village. The reason Xing Yusheng was here today was that he was genuinely puzzled about what attracted Su Liang to this place, making her utterly indifferent to living as a granddaughter to the Old Dowager of Bei Jingwang Mansion, entering the Prince Mansion as the daughter of a noble family, and enjoying luxury and wealth. Besides, she hadn't

grown up here from a young age. Besides the jade token, Xing Yusheng also brought many gifts with him. Top-grade tea leaves, ginseng, bird's nest, entire bolts of silk and cotton cloth, priceless antique vases, eight types of desserts, and a basket full of grapes that ordinary people would neither have the opportunity to eat nor have ever seen before. Qi Jun wheeled Xing Yusheng into the house, while Qi Yan carried the gifts in. "These are all prepared by my grandmother, so please accept them," said Xing Yusheng. Su Liang smiled, "Respectfully following the command. Please convey my thanks to old Madame." In Ning Jing's room, Su Liang applied acupuncture to Xing Yusheng. Ning Jing sat by, watching closely, making Xing Yusheng feel a bit uncomfortable. Xing Yusheng held good feelings towards Su Liang, as he had never met such a free-spirited, composed lady who was so capable and independent. However, since Su Liang had already married Ning Jing, Xing Yusheng didn't harbor undue thoughts. The Old Dowager, his grandmother, had more than once expressed her regret about Xing Yusheng's missed opportunity with Su Liang and truly liked her as well. But Xing Yusheng knew very well that regardless of whether it was the deceptive Huang Wanwan from before or the current Su Liang, the Old Dowager only ever wanted to find him a concubine. Xing Yusheng could use his illness as an excuse to stay away from home for a long time, but he had no say in choosing his crown princess. Even if the Old Dowager supported him, it would be in vain if the prince and the princess didn't agree. He could reject his family's arrangement and refuse to marry. But if he wished to marry legitimately, he could not avoid his family's intervention. This morning, the Old Dowager had even mentioned that as soon as Xing Yusheng's health improved, he should return home, and his marriage should be arranged as soon as possible. Even if Su Liang hadn't married Ning Jing, Xing Yusheng didn't believe she would accept being a secondary wife. Just yesterday, Xing Yusheng had received news that due to the Gu family's rebellion and subsequent execution, the marital agreement between Marquis Chang Xin's son, Gu Ling, and Miss Nian of the Nian Family, was cancelled. His stepmother, now the Princess, wanted her biological son to marry Nian Ruxue. The Old Dowager thought an alliance with the military family of Nian, which received favorable imperial attention, was a good thing for Bei Jingwang Mansion. Moreover, since she had met Nian Ruxue before, she thought her family should consider Xing Yusheng first if the two families were to form an alliance. ... The window was open. As soon as Su Liang put away the silver needles, she saw Mrs. Bai come in again, and Little Tiger and Zhuzi also ran in. Zhuzi's little face was flushed as if he had just been running around. Seeing that there were guests at home, Mrs. Bai was hesitating whether to leave or not. Then Su Liang came out and announced that Ning Jing's friend had come to visit. Mrs. Bai pulled Su Liang aside and gave her an update on the latest developments of the drama at the cow lady's house. "They really invited that old Taoist priest from the town! We all went to see it. The priest went around the cow lady's house, asked their family about their zodiac signs, guess what happened in the end?" Mrs. Bai looked eager for Su Liang to inquire further. Feigning curiosity, Su Liang asked, "Did the Taoist say there were ghosts?" "It's the middle of the day, if there were ghosts, he wouldn't be able to see them!" Mrs. Bai shook her head, "The old Taoist said Liu Huilan and Su Xingzhe's zodiac sign are in conflict! If they don't separate immediately, Su Xingzhe will be plagued by misfortune! You should have seen the cow lady's face then, just like a stone in a stinky pit!" "So that's how it is. Does this mean they are going to drive Liu Huilan away?" asked Su Liang. Mrs. Bai huffed, "The cow lady is counting on Su Xingzhe passing the examination and becoming a high official. As soon as she heard that Liu Huilan would harm Su Xingzhe, she immediately threw Liu Huilan out! Said she is no longer part of the Su Family, and to never set foot in the Su village again! Even said she was going to the county government office today to move Liu Huilan's household registration back to her maiden home! To completely sever all ties with the Su Family!" Su Liang smiled, "That's also a good

thing.” “Absolutely!” exclaimed Mrs. Bai, “I hope she remarries into a good family!” Su Liang didn’t tell Mrs. Bai that her beloved youngest son Bai He seemed interested in Liu Huilan. She acted covertly, intending to save Liu Huilan’s life, but as for matters of marriage, she had no interest in playing matchmaker, nor could she. Even though Mrs. Bai seemed genuinely sympathetic towards Liu Huilan now, if Liu Huilan wanted to marry Bai He, it would be a whole different story. ... After Xing Yusheng left, Ning Jing suddenly said to Su Liang, “If you hadn’t refused Lady Xing yesterday, she would definitely have arranged for you to marry Xing Yusheng, as a concubine.” Up until the last two words, Su Liang was not surprised, she had sensed it before. But hearing those last two words, she still stopped for a moment. Being a “concubine” was something quite unreal for the time-traveling Su Liang. Later, Little Tiger Bai secretly came over and shared his family’s “gossip”: his grandmother was so angry, she nearly fainted, because his uncle said he wanted to marry the young widow who just got chased away by the cow lady... Su Liang didn’t say anything, just gave Little Tiger Bai a box of desserts, and told him to take it back and share it with Zhuzi. Human nature is complex, from certain aspects, the lofty Lady Xing and Mrs. Bai were not much different. As long as their own interests were not affected, they weren’t stingy with showing their kindness. But if Su Liang wanted to use a debt of gratitude as a condition to marry the Crown Prince Bei Jingwang, Lady Xing would probably think she was daydreaming, even if she did save Xing Yusheng’s life. And while Mrs. Bai pitied Liu Huilan, wishing she marries into a good house, but when it comes to her own son, that simply cannot happen! Su Liang jokingly said, “If women could also participate in the Imperial examination, that would be nice. I’d secure a good status for myself. That way, if I fancied a noble son one day, I wouldn’t have to just be a concubine.” She didn’t think that Lady Xing or Mrs. Bai were all that wrong, everyone has their own position. Lady Xing believed her noble grandson should only be matched with a highborn lady, and Mrs. Bai simply hoped that her precious son could marry a maiden. None of these were excessive. Ning Jing said, “You can participate in the military exam.” Surprised, Su Liang asked, “Women are allowed to take the military exam?” “There are female generals in enemy countries who have mocked the women of the Qian country for only knowing how to embroider. So the Emperor allowed women to participate in the military exam, but to date, no woman has gained merit in the military exam.”, explained Ning Jing. “Do I have to fight level after level until I get to the capital?” Su Liang asked, highly interested. Ning Jing shook his head, “There’s no need. Before the civil examinations in the examination hall, those participating in the military exam will all go to the capital to compete. There’s only an age limit, one must be under thirty. Do you really want to participate?” “Maybe I will, maybe I won’t. We’ll see.” Su Liang said casually, “Your martial arts seem very good, how about, we go outside and have a spar?”