

Three-Time 41

Chapter 41: Witness

[Witness]

“What if Mai Fei plans to kill someone within three days? And you can see his troubled forehead, logically, you should intervene.” Su Liang said.

Ning Jing asked, “He explicitly stated his intentions to take you back to the capital for execution. If he were to be in danger, risking his life, would you want me to save him?”

“These are two different matters. Regarding what happened in the capital, I always felt that something was off.” Su Liang pondered.

The noble second prince’s wife got sick, why ask for Su Yuanzhou instead of the imperial physician? And why was it that Su Yuanzhou, even without a verdict, committed suicide out of fear of retribution? Even if he chose to commit suicide, how could he possibly force his children and grandchildren to follow?

Why did no one come to look for Su Liang when she escaped from the capital to Su Village?

If Mai Fei truly believes that Su Yuanzhou’s family should pay their life for the second prince’s wife, he could just kill them directly.

On the surface, he is a county magistrate, but in reality, he is a prince, what difficulty would there be for him to kill someone? If he didn’t want to create a scene, there were many ways to do it secretly.

Why does he need to go through all the trouble, first find Ning Jing, provide sedatives, capture Su Liang and then take her back to the capital for execution?

Is it necessary?

If it’s unnecessary, then there must be something suspicious.

Ning Jing spoke indifferently, “The second and fourth princes are not from the same mother and their appearance do not reflect their hearts.”

Su Liang said solemnly, “Regarding Su Yuanzhou, how much do you know?”

Ning Jing shook his head, “I am not clear about that matter.”

“I believe that someone else is behind the death of the second prince’s wife and

Su Yuanzhou was made the scapegoat.” Su Liang’s eyes revealed a determined look, “Clearly, do you think Mai Fei can’t see through this?”

“Perhaps he just can’t find any evidence, or a witness,” said Ning Jing, “I suspect that his intention to take you back to the capital is to use you to avenge the second prince’s wife and to deal with the second prince.”

“Are you saying, the death of the second prince’s wife is related to the second prince?” Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing said, “The second prince remarried a month after his first wife died, and six months later, he was delighted to have a son.”

Six months is not enough time for a full-term pregnancy.

But he is a prince, and what can the onlookers do when they see through the ruse?

The second prince’s wife is already dead, and Su Yuanzhou’s suicide equates to an admission of guilt.

“In that case, we still need to keep an eye on Mai Fei to see what he’ll do in the next three days.” Su Liang sighed softly.

If the original owner’s family was indeed framed and killed, as the one who has claimed this identity, she should get to the bottom of this and see what she can do.

If Mai Fei was really brainless, he would have already cut down Su Liang.

“If circumstances are as we suspect, Mai Fei could easily approach me directly.” Su Liang’s brow furrowed.

“Once I hand you over to him, you will no longer have anything to do with me, and you would have to depend on him, acting on his orders.” Ning Jing had obviously seen through the matter a long time ago, “He is also trying to test me. In their eyes, I am someone from Bei Jingwang Mansion.”

In front of Ning Jing, the fourth prince of Qian who visibly seethed with anger, and said that Su Yuanzhou deserved a punishment that should extend to his entire family and that Su Liang must not live, had calculated every step and word.

Su Liang couldn’t help but sigh, “Indeed a prince, well versed in the way of survival. You have already told him that I lost my memory. Even if I don’t have any evidence after you hand me over to him, he will create the evidence he wants. What’s useful is just my identity as a victim, right!”

“Yes, not too stupid.” Ning Jing nodded.

Su Liang strongly suspected that Ning Jing had seen through everything a long time ago but chose not to tell her, making her think for herself step by step.

“If I were to treat Mai Fei as someone who wants to kill me, and in the future you do not interfere with whether he lives or dies, would you change your mind about wanting me to work for you?” Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing did not answer her question, “I just want to remind you, outside is not Su Village, survival is not that easy.”

Su Liang agreed and added, “Especially, the capital city.”

Ning Jing ended the discussion about Mai Fei, “I’m hungry.”

“The meal I kept for you is in the pot.” Su Liang pointed to the kitchen, then sat down by the stone table in the courtyard and sighed. If only she had the original owner’s memory, she wouldn’t be clueless when facing the sudden emergence of an “enemy”.

She then thought about how the old lady Xing had originally planned for her to become Xing Yusheng’s concubine.

Did the old lady Xing know nothing about what happened to Su Yuanzhou’s family? Or, given her status, had she long been accustomed to Imowing but not saying? After all, for the Bei Jingwang Mansion, it would be easy to protect a girl who hasn’t been convicted.

After all, what Su Liang was really valued for were her medical skills, as well as being considered Xing Yusheng’s lifesaver.

Ning Jing brought out the warm food and sat across from Su Liang, eating unhurriedly.

Su Liang held her small face in her hands and looked at the sky clear as a mirror, feeling nostalgic for her previous life for the first time since she came to this world. After all, that world didn’t have so much intrigue and conspiracy. When Ning Jing was about to finish his meal, there was a knock on the door.

Su Liang opened the door and found a group of yamen runners.

“The county magistrate is about to hold court for the theft and examination fraud case involving Su Xingzhe. Ning Gongzi is summoned to testify.”

Ning Jing put down his chopsticks, wiped his hands, got up and said, “Okay.”

“I want to go too.” Su Liang wanted to see what this “Musi” who threatened to take her back to the capital for execution looked like.

She had worn men’s clothing when she went out in the morning for convenience and didn’t change, so she just followed Ning Jing out, locked the main door, and headed for the county government.

Half an hour ago.

The outside of the Yamen was crowded with common people who came to watch the excitement.

Exam fraud is a serious crime, and it also involved theft. This topic had been the hot topic in the county town for the past few days.

Beating the drum to appeal for justice was Su Xingzhe’s second brother, Su Xingsheng, who knelt in court and queued up to swear, insisting there must be a misunderstanding, his brother hadn’t left the house the day before the court examination and could not have committed theft.

Su Xingzhe, shackled, was brought forth.

In just two days, he looked as if he had shed a layer of skin, his hair unkempt like dry grass, his eyes vacant, and knelt down beside Su Xingsheng under pressure.

Mai Fei asked blankly, “Su Xingzhe, regarding the fact that you did not leave your house the day before the court examination, do you have any witnesses other than your family?”

Su Xingzhe slowly raised his head, deflected the question by answering, "The examination paper was not stolen by me. The examiner gave it to me."

The whole court was in an uproar.

Mai Fei remained calm, "Do you have any evidence?"

Su Xingzhe's head bowed, "Five days before the court examination, the examiner met me alone at the county school. My classmates were there and knew about it."

"The examiner meeting you alone, and him giving you the examination paper, are two different matters." Mai Fei scoffed, "Answer the official, who can prove that the examiner gave you the examination paper?"

Su Xingzhe's body trembled, and he fell silent.

The common people outside the court were whispering, all thinking that Su Xingzhe was talking nonsense to escape punishment.

Who knew that Su Xingzhe suddenly raised his head, raising his voice, "There is someone who can testify for me! This year's top scorer, Ning Jing from my village!"

Mai Fei's eyes sparkled slightly, "You're saying he saw it with his own eyes?"

"Yes! Please summon Ning Jing, he can prove my innocence!" Su Xingzhe's voice suddenly became firm.

"Come here." Mai Fei nodded, "Go and invite Gongzi Ning. Be polite, he is the close friend of the Crown Prince Bei Jingwang."

The implications of his final words spoken in public were profound.

As they waited for Ning Jing to arrive, Mai Fei asked Su Xingzhe, "Did you say the head examiner gave you a sample paper? What exactly did he say?"

"The head examiner didn't say it was a sample paper, only that it was some useful topic and good answer for the court examination, and he wanted me to bring it back and take a look." Su Xingzhe replied.

"Did you have any interaction with the head examiner before that?" Mai Fei asked.

Su Xingzhe shook his head, "My family is poor, and I just met the head examiner for the first time that day. I also found it strange at the time, wondering why I caught his eye. I even deluded myself, wondering if the essay I submitted earlier was appreciated or even fantasized, that the head examiner's granddaughter happened to see me, fell in love, and he wanted to betroth his granddaughter to me, so he assisted me."

His words incited a round of raucous laughter.

The spectators outside the hall mocked Su Xingzhe for his delusions, calling him a toad who wanted to eat swan meat, saying he was out of his mind, ranting, shameless...

Even Su Xingsheng was left stunned by Su Xingzhe's words.

The only one, Mai Fei, his gaze on Su Xingzhe turned mysteriously deep.

Because he knew the truth, Su Xingzhe's defense was not the truth. The paper that the head examiner asked him to bring to Ning Jing, in Su Xingzhe's mouth, became the one gave to him.

Of course, the nature of the two was not the same.

In the former, Su Xingzhe would be implicated in theft.

In the latter, the process where he obtained the sample paper was entirely passive.

It was a clever move, implicating the head examiner as well.

But, one man's testimony was useless, there needed to be evidence, or a witness.

The key laid in Ning Jing, whom Su Xingzhe was to summon to testify for him.

"The witness is here!"

The crowd made way, and Mai Fei saw two figures walking side by side, their faces obscured by the light.

As they neared the court, Mai Fei's gaze swept over Ning Jing and landed on Su Liang.

Su Liang was also looking at Mai Fei. She remembered having seen him a few days ago, but Mai Fei obviously didn't recognize her then.

Which was normal. The original lady had a lowly status in the capital and had no chance of knowing a noble prince.

Mai Fei regained composed himself, "Arrange a seat for Master Ning." "No need." Ning Jing stood not far from Su Xingzhe.

Su Xingzhe looked at Ning Jing with urgent eyes, "Master Ning, we both from the same village, but we usually don't interact. Five days before the court examination, I went to the county school, and the head examiner inexplicably gave me a paper and asked me to take it back and discuss it with you! At that time, I thought I had caught the eye of the head examiner and was overjoyed. I was even beaten out of jealousy by the classmates!"

Mai Fei narrowed his eyes and hit the gavel to quiet the spectators outside of the hall.

As Su Xingzhe spoke, tears streamed down his face, "I was afraid that my parents would be upset when they saw that I was hurt, so I rested and applied medicine in the tea house in town, and looked at the paper first. When I got back to the village, I didn't go home but went to find you to discuss according to the head examiner's instruction. But our two families had some previous unpleasantness, and you probably didn't trust me, so you burned the paper I gave you on the spot! You didn't look at it at all!"

Mai Fei looked at Ning Jing, but couldn't read his emotions.

"Master Ning! I am wronged! That was truly given by the head examiner! I only realized it was the same as the examination questions when I went to the court examination! I was influenced by the answers on the sample paper, and couldn't think

of any other answers during the exam!" Su Xingzhe wept bitterly, "It's like composing poetry and prose, once you've seen the best, you can't write it yourself!"

Ning Jing remained silent, while Su Xingzhe's voice was filled with grief and anger, "After being arrested, I only realized that there is no such thing as a pie in the sky. What am I? All this, it's all a scheme aimed at Master Ning! The head examiner was bribed by someone, used me to frame Master Ning! It's just that Master Ning was clever and evaded, while I, who is just a pawn nobody cares about, have to ruin my life and lose my life over it! How is it fair?!"

"Studying hard for more than ten years, only to end up as a stepping stone for others! I want to ask heaven, what exactly did I do wrong?!" Su Xingzhe fell to the ground crying.

The crowd watching had quieted down, looking at each other.

Su Liang thought that Su Xingzhe was indeed a "talented person". His mind worked quickly. What he said wasn't all true, but all of it was in his favor.

And the truth was, indeed, someone wanted to frame Ning Jing, but he did not fall for it. Su Xingzhe was indeed used by someone, although he was not entirely innocent.

"Mr. Ning, what do you have to say?" Mai Fei sat up straight and looked deeply into Ning Jing's eyes.

All eyes were on Ning Jing, who spoke indifferently, "What he said about me is true."

Su Xingzhe shivered, his crying sounding even more tragic.

Outside the court, Su Xingzhe's family also began to wail loudly, crying out injustice.

The crowd was in an uproar.

No one had expected such a reversal!

Ning Jing was the initial suspect in this case, and not long ago, Mai Fei publicly stated that he was a friend of Crown Prince Bei Jingwang. His words naturally carried weight.

Su Xingzhe looked up again, choking, "The officials can verify that I was at the tea house in Feiyan Town that day for a long while, someone must have seen me! And the Chief Examiner talked to me, my classmates from the County School can testify!"

Mai Fei's face was stern, he banged the gavel again, "Order in the court! Ning Jing, are you saying that you saw the papers the Chief Examiner sent to you and Su Xingzhe, and that you saw the paper yourself? Why then, when Su Xingzhe was arrested yesterday, did you not say a word?"

Ning Jing was calm, "He did bring it to me and I did see it, but I burned it without opening. I had no idea it was a stylized paper."

What he said could be fully corroborated with what Su Xingzhe had stated.

"Do you also think that the Chief Examiner was bribed and intentionally set you up?" Mai Fei asked coldly.

Ning Jing's expression was indifferent, "I believe that is a matter that needs to be investigated by the authorities."

Su Liang was not surprised by Ning Jing's choice. He was not trying to save Su Xingzhe but to bring the real culprit to justice.

Missing out on the Court Examination and winding up in jail was the price Su Xingzhe paid for his greed.

If Ning Jing said that there was something wrong with Su Xingzhe's words, even if it's a small lie, he could not defend himself any longer. This would soon come to an end with Su Xingzhe's death.

Moreover, if Ning Jing revealed a truth that contradicted Su Xingzhe's words, it would be a one-sided statement, with no one to testify for him.

Looking at the matter as it is, the person who deserves to die the most this time is not Su Xingzhe.

"Heavens! It was the Chief Examiner who cheated and harmed people!"

"He must have been bribed! I heard that Mr. Ning is from one of the four great merchants of Qian Country, Ning's family, but he was chased out of the family and hiding here! Maybe it's the Ning family who want to harm him!"

"Su Xingzhe is so pitiful! He did nothing wrong!"

The public opinion was turned, and the onlookers started to feel sorry for Su Xingzhe, completely forgetting their previous mockery and eagerness to watch his execution.

"Summon the guards!" Mai Fei demanded coldly, "Bring Zhao Qingsong here!" That was the name of the Chief Examiner.

"Court adjourned! We will continue the trial tomorrow!" Mai Fei announced as he stood up to leave.

Su Xingzhe was taken away again by the guards. He did not look at Ning Jing or say anything to him, fearing that someone might suspect they had prearranged their testimony.

Su Xingzhe was betting, betting on Ning Jing not standing by and watching him die, betting on his desire to find out who was pulling the Chief Examiner's strings.

He won his bet.

As Ning Jing came out, Su Liang chuckled lightly, "I just said someone wanted me as a witness, you've experienced it firsthand. How do you feel?"

Ning Jing furrowed his brows slightly, thought for a while, "I spoke too much today, I'm tired.."

Chapter 42: 042.0f course

[Of course]

“Then try to play mute tomorrow.” Su Liang blurted out sarcastically. This man usually speaks sparingly. Even though he spoke more than usual today, it was still far below a normal person’s level. What was he so tired about?

Ning Jing nodded slightly, “Sure.”

Su Liang: ...

Back home in the county town, just as they were about to close the door, Su Xingzhe’s family members chased them down, crying and ready to kneel down to Ning Jing and Su Liang. Passersby nearby all looked this way.

Su Liang’s face darkened, “Stand up!”

The old woman was startled by Su Liang’s cold gaze. Her trembling legs gave way and only by leaning on her son did she manage not to fall over.

“Ning Jing went to testify, just to tell the truth, not to save Su Xingzhe. Do you come here without fear of the County Magistrate thinking that we are relatives, have private dealings, and ruling Ning Jing’s testimony invalid?” Su Liang said coldly.

Su Xingsheng looked horrified and reacted with a start. He supported the old woman to stand up and quickly turned around to leave.

“That wench, what she...” The old woman began to curse Su Liang again.

Su Xingsheng quickly covered the old woman’s mouth, stomping his feet in annoyance, “Mom, just shut up! Don’t you see that Su Liang and Ning Jing are trying to save my third brother? The reason she just sent us away is also for my third brother’s benefit!”

The old woman was left gaping in astonishment, unable to speak.

After a while, she clenched her teeth and grumbled, “You idiots! Do you really think they are good-hearted? Zhe got into trouble, and that’s all due to Ning Jing! Zhe innocently took the blame for him!”

“If Su Xingzhe ends up being alright, I doubt that he would feel grateful towards you. Instead, he would blame all misfortunes on you. Me too,” Su Liang said with a slight sigh.

“You want to kill him?” Ning Jing countered, glancing at the glabella on Su Liang’s forehead.

Su Liang shook her head, “No. If we kill one Su Xingzhe, his family will hate us and may seek revenge. Are we to wipe out them all? The death of Su Daqiang and his family is necessary because they conspired to kill... me.”

By the time she uttered the last word, Su Liang felt it a bit strange, so she ended up the topic, “Let’s see the result of the case tomorrow.”

At dusk, when Su Liang asked Ning Jing to make a fire and prepare dinner, she found he was not at home.

After they returned, Su Liang went back to her room to read, while Ning Jing tidied up the dishes he'd used before returning to his own room.

Su Liang had absolutely no idea when he had gone out.

By the time Su Liang was about to finish cooking the porridge, Ning Jing was back.

"Did you go to 'protect' Mai Fei, or to investigate Zhao Zhukao?" Su Liang lifted the lid of the pot, and a waft of delicious aroma billowed out.

Ning Jing walked into the kitchen, handing a delicate jar to Su Liang.

"What's this?" Su Liang took it, opened the lid, and smelled the sweet scent she hadn't encountered for a long time.

It was the honey she'd casually mentioned to Ning Jing when she "invited" him to drink some natural pomegranate juice today, saying, "It would be great if there were any."

"Where did you get it?" Su Liang was pleasantly surprised.

"From the County government," Ning Jing answered.

Su Liang understood. It must be from Mai Fei. After all, he wasn't just an ordinary County Magistrate, but the fourth prince of Qian Country. Even though he was under disguise here, he would not change his habits regarding food and clothing.

And this thing could not have been gifted to Ning Jing by Mai Fei, so he must have taken it on the sly.

"I'll make another bowl of pomegranate juice for you later. I guarantee it will taste good," Su Liang said, setting the honey down.

Ning Jing sat down naturally to build a fire, "Zhao Qingsong is dead." Su Liang frowned, "How did he die?"

"When the people who were to arrest him got there, he had already hung himself. The body was still warm," Ning Jing said.

This reminded Su Liang of Su Yuanzhou's family, who had supposedly committed suicide for fear of punishment.

She believed there must be a problem with Zhao Qingsong, but whether it was suicide or he was silenced, it was still uncertain.

"In Zhao Qingsong's room, officials found a large amount of unaccountable wealth. A waiter stepped forward and said he remembered a mysterious young gentleman meeting Zhao Qingsong in a restaurant a few days ago." The flickering firelight gave Ning Jing's cool face an eerie illumination.

Su Liang was taken aback, "Is it Ning Huan, the one you killed? Was he the one who bribed and instigated the chief examiner to frame you? The timeline is right. Although it was not public that

you were recommended by Xing Yusheng to participate in the Court Examination, Ning Huan had plenty of money to investigate you.”

Initially, she had thought that the Ning family would not have enough time to do something upon learning that Ning Jing was going to participate in the imperial exam.

However, she had overlooked the fact that Ning Yao had sent Ning Huan, the sixth son of the Ning family, to deal with Ning Jing, and he had stayed in Bei'an County for some days.

Ning Huan, who knew he was doomed to die, would not reveal his evil deeds and alert Ning Jing.

With that, the truth seemed to have suddenly become clear.

“So is it true that Zhao Qingsong committed suicide out of guilt? After all, Ning

Huan and his subordinates have already been handled by you,” Su Liang said.

Ning Jing stared at the jumping flames in the stove, falling silent.

At the county government.

Mai Fei was informed that the honey brought from the capital city was missing. 1-1's aide, Chang'an, was about to investigate, but was stopped.

“I didn't expect that Zhao Qingsong would first take money from the Ning family, then pretend to obey his master. How clever!” Chang'an sneered, “Even without an order from the master, he had been bought to cheat. If he hadn't committed suicide, I would have killed him!”

Mai Fei narrowed his eyes slightly, “Coincidence? I can only say that the Ning family in Xunyang has never let Ning Jing go, nor allowed him to stand out.”

“If that's the case, just kill him! Why go through all this trouble? Given the Ning family's wealth, why didn't they hire Yanyun Building?” Chang'an was confused.

Mai Fei smiled vaguely, “How do you know they didn't? Do you think Ning Jing is still alive, has won the jade token of Crown Prince Bei Jingwang, and is participating in the imperial examination, all due to good fortune? Or his elder brother's kindness?”

“I don't understand, he has been expelled from the family, so he has nothing to do with the Ning Family. Why do they insist on killing him?” Chang'an frowned and asked.

“You don't know the reason, that's why you think so. The mother of Ning Jing also has the surname Ning,” Mai Fei said.

Chang'an was stunned, “This...”

“The previous head of the Ning family, Ning Jixian, was Ning Jing's maternal grandfather. All his sons died prematurely, leaving only one daughter who grew up. He was supposed to have adopted a nephew to inherit the family business, but he did not do so,” Mai Fei said, “The current head of the Ning family, Ning Zhong, is

nothing more than a son-in-law who took his wife's surname! If Ning Jixian hadn't died early, how could the Ning family be in such a state today? Ning Zhong's children, apart from Ning Jing, are not of the legitimate bloodline of Ning family of Xunyang at all, but are just bastards of other surnames. As long as Ning Jing is alive, they will always be bastards."

Chang'an was surprised, "A son-in-law has given birth to so many siblings for Ning Jing? Then they expelled Ning Jing from the family..."

"It's a big joke," Mai Fei snorted, "The emperor plans to get rid of Bei Jingwang. I tried Ning Jing with Zhao Qingsong, only wanting to see his character and talent. If there's a problem, just get rid of him directly. If he can be utilized, it's also good to use him to take down the Ning family. Today, I tested him with Su Liang. He took away the sedatives, but he was not very discerning when acting as a witness. What kind of person do you think he is?"

Chang'an shook his head, "I can't see through him. But there's nothing wrong with his testimony today. Knowing that someone wants to harm him and not knowing that it has anything to do with the master, he just wanted to find the person behind the scenes."

Mai Fei's eyes were unfathomable, "Let's see if he will give Su Liang to me."

"What if he took the sedatives just to appease the master, and refuses to hand over Su Liang? After all, he has support. The power of Bei Jingwang Mansion is not small and it has not yet fallen," Chang'an asked.

Mai Fei seemed thoughtful, "Being able to be husband and wife, but choosing to be siblings indicates that there are no romantic feelings between them. Ning Jing's feelings for Su Liang may not be devoid of the intention to use her. If he doesn't understand this, I'll talk to Su Liang myself. Do you think she would choose to go with me?"

Chang'an nodded immediately, "Of course!"

Chapter 43: 043. Assassination

[Assassination]

After their first Mid -Autumn Festival since Su Liang's transmigration, Su Liang and Ning Jing had dinner and followed Bai Dama's advice to worship the Moon Goddess in the courtyard.

Red candles, incense table, four desserts, a plate of mooncakes, four pomegranates, and a pot of wine.

After the worship, Su Liang cut a mooncake in half and shared it with Ning Jing.

"Do you believe in Chang'e in the Moon Palace?" Su Liang looked up at the night sky.

Ning Jing counter-questioned, "Why does the moon only shine at night?"

Transmigrator Su Liang was asking about mythology, while the genuine ancient Ning Jing started to explore scientific principles.

Su Liang chuckled lightly, "It's quite complicated."

"Please elaborate." Ning Jing knew Su Liang knew many unimaginable things in this world.

"The moon itself does not emit light. The moonlight we see is formed by the moon reflecting sunlight," Su Liang said.

Ning Jing frowned slightly as he listened to Su Liang talk about seemingly fanciful things like the universe, the Milky Way, stars, and planets.

After talking for a long time, Su Liang yawned, "Do you think I'm just spouting nonsense?"

Ning Jing shook his head, "Can you write down all the knowledge you've learned and let me see it?"

Su Liang was stunned for a moment and shook her head, "It's not that I don't want to, but there's too much."

Ning Jing nodded slightly, "Then never mind."

"If there's anything you want to know, you can ask me, and I'll surely tell you everything," Su Liang said.

"Alright." Ning Jing stood up, "The pomegranate juice..."

Su Liang remembered she promised to make pomegranate juice for Ning Jing but had forgotten.

"Let's do it tomorrow. Drinking it so late is not good for the body," Su Liang said.

The next morning, the county government was surrounded by an impenetrable crowd.

The trial's events had been spread far and wide, and the sudden reversal caught everyone off guard. Zhao Qingsong's guilt-driven suicide was also well-known.

Su Liang planned to eat breakfast on the street and asked Ning Jing if he wanted to go, and he just nodded.

"The County Magistrate will probably send someone to call you for questioning again." Su Liang said.

Ning Jing nodded.

"Su Xingzhe really did plagiarize in the Court Examination. His defense, that he couldn't think of better answers after seeing the standard ones, is not unreasonable, but it's just sophistry. Knowing full well that his answers would be recognized by Zhao Qingsong, he could have made some changes based on their intent." Su Liang said.

Ning Jing nodded again.

Su Liang stopped and looked at him, "Are you really not going to speak today?"

Ning Jing nodded again.

Su Liang held her forehead, "Whatever."

Just after the two finished their breakfast, the bailiff came.

At the county government, they saw Niu Madam's entire family kneeling in the hall, sobbing heart-wrenchingly and shouting about their grievance.

Mai Fei's face was stern as he slammed the gavel heavily, "Silence!"

The bailiff brought in the money and property Zhao Qingsong had received and a portrait drawn by an artist based on the memory of a waiter at the restaurant, asking Ning Jing to identify it.

"Ning Jing, do you recognize the person in the picture?" Mai Fei asked.

Ning Jing shook his head.

"Answer the official's question!" Mai Fei said coldly.

Su Liang quickly stepped forward to explain, "Sir, he took the wrong medicine, injured his throat, and can't speak temporarily."

Seeing Su Liang in a pale green dress, Mai Fei paused, and after hearing her words, the corner of his mouth twitched, "Why did Ning Jing take medicine?"

"He has always had a weak constitution." Su Liang casually said. Mai Fei's eyes narrowed slightly, "Who are you to Ning Jing?"

"Sworn sister." Su Liang said.

Mai Fei looked at Ning Jing again, "Just now you shook your head because you don't recognize the person in the portrait?"

Ning Jing nodded.

Mai Fei asked Su Xingzhe, "Do you have anything to add to yesterday's testimony?"

His family and the spectators were all in an uproar, but Mai Fei coldly snorted,

"The truth of this case has been thoroughly investigated. The chief examiner,

Zhao Qingsong, accepted bribes and framed Su Xingzhe and Ning Jing. Su Xingzhe cheated in the Court Examination. Ning Jing has committed no wrongdoing. "

Su Xingzhe's face turned pale, "Sir! The chief examiner wanted to frame Ning

Jing, not me! I was just being used! I didn't cheat!"

"The source of the money and property Zhao Qingsong received is unknown since he is dead. I, as the official, cannot conclude that it was given by the Ning family simply because they are wealthy. After all, Zhao Qingsong found you first; it may well be your enemy at work," Mai Fei said coldly.

Niu Madam shouted, "Impossible! It was my son who took the blame for Ning Jing! "

“Silence!” Mai Fei’s cold expression remained, “Criminal Su Xingzhe argued yesterday that after seeing the sample answer, he couldn’t think of a better one. But your answers are exactly the same as the sample, which is irrefutable plagiarism! After so many years of studying, couldn’t you have written even one different word?”

The onlookers started discussing again.

“Yeah, how could they be exactly the same?”

“Isn’t that plagiarism? And now he’s acting innocent!”

“Didn’t he say yesterday that he thought Zhao Qingsong was going to marry his granddaughter to him? He must have thought that if he copied well enough, Zhao Qingsong would recognize his paper and give him a pass!”

“Although I didn’t pass the scholar’s exam, I wouldn’t be unable to write a single word after seeing someone else’s answer! Nonsense! ”

“Zhao Qingsong voluntarily gave you the sample paper, even if the mistake was not on you at the beginning, but when you discovered the problem on the day of the court examination, you still chose to copy it as it was, knowing it was wrong. You tell me, isn’t this cheating?” Mai Fei asked coldly.

Su Xingzhe wanted to say something, but when he opened his mouth, he couldn’t make a sound, and his body softened, fainting.

“Zhao Qingsong committed suicide out of fear, and all his bribes are confiscated! Su Xingzhe cheated on the court examination, and there’s solid evidence for that, death penalty! Leave the court!” Mai Fei’s words fell, and he got up and left.

Su Xingzhe was dragged away by two bailiffs, and Niu the meddler had fainted from fear.

Originally, after yesterday’s trial, many people thought that Su Xingzhe would be acquitted, and some even thought he should be compensated, because he was harmed and lost the opportunity to take the court examination, and would have to wait another three years to participate in the imperial examination.

But unexpectedly, Mai Fei resolutely sentenced Su Xingzhe to death.

The punishment for cheating on the imperial examination in Qian Country is extremely severe. From a legal point of view, this result is not wrong.

Su Xingzhe had the subjective intention of cheating and carried out the cheating act in objective terms. He deserved the punishment.

It could be argued that he was implicated by Ning Jing, but the original paper was not for Su Xingzhe, and Zhao Qingsong had explicitly told him not to open it.

If Su Xingzhe had any integrity, he wouldn’t have looked at it, let alone copied it.

He knew very well what was going on. He thought that someone wanted to give Ning Jing some backdoor advantage, and since Ning Jing had burned the paper, only he had seen it; he chose to steal Ning Jing's "privilege". If discovered afterward, no one would dare to speak out.

However, he never thought that what he had stolen was a death warrant. It was like someone holding a golden fan claiming to look for Ning Jing; Su Xingzhe saw the gold and greedily impersonated Ning Jing intending to seize it, only to find that the golden fan had turned into a sharp knife when it approached him.

Su Liang still believed that Su Xingzhe was a smart person, but his intentions were not upright.

At the beginning, when he tried to force himself on a widow, Ning Jing and Su Liang didn't kill him, but in the end, he sought his own death.

After leaving the county government, Su Liang asked Ning Jing in a low voice, "Does Mai Fei still have black fog in the center of his eyebrows?"

Ning Jing nodded.

"Then let's go back to the village after three days." Su Liang said.

As soon as they returned home, Su Bai came to visit.

He came to the county town specifically for Su Xingzhe's case, and before today's trial, he too thought that Su Xingzhe would be fine, but he didn't expect that the death penalty couldn't be escaped.

"Uncle Bai, if you want us to save him, there's no need to say it. Once he did that, there's no turning back." Su Liang's expression was faint.

Su Bai sighed, "I know. I've watched that kid grow up and always thought he would achieve something great, but I never thought that after reading so many books of sages, he wouldn't learn how to be a decent human being. Although the new County Magistrate is young, he's got a clear mind!"

Those who didn't know the truth were easily led, but by now, there was little dispute about whether Su Xingzhe was plagiarizing or not. "Uncle Bai, do you have any other business with us?" Su Liang asked.

Su Bai nodded, "Yes. Those who placed in the top three in the court examination can be admitted to Qianshan Academy in the provincial city and receive funding from the county government. I was wondering, after young master Ning leaves, Miss Liang, you won't be following him, right?"

Su Liang was stunned and looked at Ning Jing, but he shook his head, indicating that he didn't know.

"You didn't know?" Su Bai was surprised, "That's how it has always been. Qianshan Academy is a prestigious institution, and the admission quota is extremely rare. It would be a pity if young master Ning did not seize this opportunity. But Miss Liang, as a girl, you wouldn't be allowed to enter the academy; you might as well stay in the village, where at least we're all family, and there would be someone to look after you." "Are you going?" Su Liang asked Ning Jing.

Ning Jing shook his head; he wouldn't go.

"Uncle Bai, he's not going. We'll go back to the village in a few days." Su Liang said.

Su Bai left with a large basket of pomegranates.

Su Liang originally wanted to ask Ning Jing about Qianshan Academy, but he didn't feel like talking today, so she let it go.

Chang'an knocked on the door and waited for a while before hearing footsteps.

The door opened, and Su Liang asked, "Does the County Magistrate want to see Ning Jing?"

Chang'an saluted, "My master is unwell and would like to invite Miss Su to come and examine him."

Su Liang knew that Mai Fei suddenly asked her to see a patient, there must be something fishy, so she refused right away, "I'm not good at medical skills, please find someone else."

Chang'an stopped Su Liang from closing the door, "Miss Su, please come with me."

This only confirmed Su Liang's suspicion that something was wrong, "Where is Magistrate Mai?"

"Master is at Ling Mountain Temple," Chang'an said, "The carriage is ready."

Su Liang knew about Ling Mountain Temple. It was the most famous temple in

Bei'an County, located on the west outskirts of the county town, and she had planned to visit it sometime.

"Alright, please wait a moment outside." Su Liang closed the door.

Half a moment later, Su Liang came out, changed her clothes, carried the medicine box, and Ning Jing followed behind her.

Chang'an chuckled, "Isn't young master Ning sick? Why not get some rest at home?"

Su Liang answered for him, "His illness requires him to walk around more."

Chang'an: .

The autumn scenery at Ling Mountain Temple is stunning.

Upon getting off the carriage, Su Liang admired the ancient temple with its colorful woods and walked in, with Ning Jing silently following behind her, carrying the medicine box. The reason the two decided to come had to do with Ning Jing seeing the black fog in the center of Mai Fei's eyebrows.

"My master is inside, Miss Su, please." Chang'an was very polite to Su Liang.

Su Liang suspected Mai Fei intended to confront her. After all, the sedatives had been in Ning Jing's hands for two days, and he hadn't done anything.

Entering the quiet guesthouse courtyard, a spectacular red maple tree stood in the middle, as dazzling as the colorful clouds on the horizon.

Mai Fei emerged, a faint smile at the corner of his lips.

As he stood under the red maple tree, a sudden change occurred!

A killer in colorful clothes, with a red ribbon wrapped around his head, who had perfectly blended in with the dense red maple tree, suddenly sprang out! Head -down, his straight, long sword pierced upwards at Mai Fei's head!

Chapter 44: 044. I am willing

[I am willing]

"Master, be careful!" Chang'an's face showed horror as he unsheathed his sword and rushed forward.

At the same time, four masters dashed out from the dark.

Su Liang saw that Mai Fei had evaded the fatal blow and silently pulled Ning Jing back to a safer distance.

Mai Fei, who had been struck in the left shoulder by a sword, was quickly rescued and moved to a safe area.

Su Liang initially thought he was in mortal danger and that Ning Jing needed to save him.

Only now did she realize that Mai Fei's glabella was dark, meaning he was about to kill someone, and Ning Jing had to stop him.

Gazing at the colorful-clothed assassin, Su Liang asked softly, "Could it be that heaven wants us to save her?"

Ning Jing nodded, confirming Su Liang's judgment.

The woman in colorful clothes had her face covered, so her face couldn't be seen, just a pair of eyes filled with hatred.

She didn't look like a professional assassin.

Unlike Yan Shiba, who took people's money to kill for them, this woman seemed to have emotional fluctuations when she killed.

The colorful-clothed woman was skilled in Martial Arts, but the secret guards around Mai Fei were no ordinary people, and they also had a numerical advantage.

Her defeat was imminent, and she wanted to escape but was injured.

"Master, let's go back to the room and have Miss Su treat your injuries!" Chang'an supported Mai Fei.

Mai Fei coldly glanced at the colorful-clothed woman who was stabbed again,

"No hurry, I won't die."

Su Liang wasn't in a hurry either. In this moment, she was more concerned about the assassin.

After a quarter of an hour, the colorful-clothed woman was captured by the secret guard and knelt before Mai Fei.

Her face cover was removed, revealing a scar from a burn on half of her cheek. She was very young, and her eyes showed no fear, only deep hatred.

Su Liang looked at Ning Jing, who shook his head to indicate he did not recognize her.

“Who are you? Who sent you?” Mai Fei asked coldly.

The woman spat and sneered with mockery but kept silent.

Chang’an kicked her in the chest, sending her flying and coughing up blood, but she continued to laugh.

It was a fearless attitude that put life and death aside.

“Master, she seems to be a Death Soldier,” Chang’an frowned.

Assassins work for money and can be bought, but Death Soldiers work for faith and are not afraid of death.

Searching through her belongings, they found nothing related to her identity. Mai Fei’s face remained expressionless, “Kill her.”

Ning Jing pushed Su Liang, who suddenly stood between Mai Fei and the woman.

Mai Fei narrowed his eyes, ‘Miss Su, what are you doing?

“Mai Fei, isn’t it inappropriate to kill at a peaceful place like Ling Mountain Temple?” Su Liang really wanted to punch Ning Jing.

Mai Fei snorted, “She started it. In that case, let Chang’an take her out of Ling

Mountain Temple and kill her afterward. Miss Su wouldn’t object, would she?” Su Liang sighed softly, “Can you please spare her life, Mai Fei?” Not only Mai Fei, but also the woman on the ground looked at Su Liang.

“Miss Su, your behavior makes me suspect that you and her are in cahoots,” Mai Fei stared at Su Liang’s eyebrows and eyes, feeling that he had seen her somewhere long ago, perhaps passing by her on the streets of the capital city?

“I lost my memory after my previous injury, and I forgot everything that happened before. Maybe we do have some connection, but I don’t know why, I just want to save her.” Su Liang’s words sounded quite bold, but knowing Mai Fei’s background and the purpose of finding her, she deliberately said this to remind Mai Fei that if he wanted to use her, he had to offer some benefits first.

As expected, Mai Fei fell silent, weighing whether it was worth it or not.

After a while, he snorted coldly, “I’ll give Miss Su this face! But if she dares to assassinate again next time, I won’t be so polite.”

Su Liang smiled slightly, "Having seen the power of Mai Fei's skilled people, she won't foolishly risk her life again, right?"

"Master, treating your injuries is the priority!" Chang'an reminded Mai Fei.

"Then please trouble Miss Su," said Mai Fei, and Chang'an helped him back to the room.

Su Liang pulled up the colorful-clothed woman and whispered, "I don't know you, and saving you was just an impulse. There is no need to repay me. Just go, and don't do anything reckless again."

The colorful-clothed woman was stunned, but Su Liang had already let her go and was walking towards Mai Fei's room.

From beginning to end, Ning Jing had no presence.

As Su Liang entered the room and looked back, both the assassin and Mai Fei's secret guards had disappeared, leaving only traces of blood in the courtyard, evidence of the recent fight.

"I have little experience in medicine, are you sure you want me to treat you?" Su Liang asked again.

Mai Fei nodded, "Thank you." Having lost a considerable amount of blood, his face grew even paler.

"You all, please leave." Mai Fei gazed at Chang'an and Ning Jing.

Chang'an frowned, "I have to ensure my master's safety." Su Liang had just saved one person who tried to kill Mai Fei, so his eyes were filled with vigilance as he looked at her.

Su Liang spoke, "Ning Jing must stay to ensure my safety."

Mu Fei originally wanted to talk to Su Liang about something private, but the secret guard had just exposed his true identity as more than just a County Magistrate. It just so happened that he also planned on winning Ning Jing over.

Su Liang treated Mu Fei's wounds and stopped the bleeding, then Mu Fei asked Ning Jing directly about the whereabouts of the sedatives.

Ning Jing did not answer. Su Liang remained calm, "I'm aware of this situation. Master Mu, care to explain?"

"You two truly are siblings who trust each other!" Mu Fei's words were filled with meaning.

"Compared to the mysterious Master Mu, we naturally trust each other more." Su Liang said.

Mu Fei nodded slightly, "That's true. Actually, my real name is Duanmu Chen." Su Liang appeared surprised, "A member of the Royal Family?"

Mu Fei looked at Ning Jing, who was flipping through the Buddhist Scripture on the table, his expression unreadable.

“My master is the fourth prince.” Chang’an said. But he didn’t understand why Mu Fei was revealing his true identity in front of these two.

“Why would the fourth prince come to this small place as a County Magistrate?” Su Liang looked puzzled, “By the way, I heard some rumors that an imperial envoy came to Bei’an County to investigate the iron mine smuggling case. Could it be...”

“It’s me.” Mu Fei said.

Su Liang continued to treat Mu Fei’s wounds without stopping, “Your Highness, why not investigate secretly instead? This is much too dangerous.”

Mu Fei didn’t answer this question. But Su Liang guessed that he might have intentionally exposed himself to lure enemies, confusing them and arranging more crucial things in secret.

However, the abilities and performances of the assassin just now didn’t suggest he was sent by any powerful figure. It seemed more like someone with a personal grudge against Mu Fei. Su Liang believed that Mu Fei had let the man go as a favor to her because the assassin wasn’t threatening enough.

Events from the past couple of days had proven this fourth prince to be quite calculating and cautious.

Next, Mu Fei brought up Su Yuanzhou’s affairs.

Su Liang frowned as she listened. What Mu Fei said was almost the same as what Ning Jing knew. After listening, Su Liang asked, “So, do you mean that my family was framed?”

“You’d better call me Master Mu.” Mu Fei said, “I do suspect that, but I have no evidence. When I learned that you were in Bei’an County, I hoped you could return to the capital and assist in the investigation of the truth. I didn’t expect you to lose your memory. But even with amnesia, you’re a key witness who might recall something in the future. The sedative I gave to Ning Jing was just to test his character, never intended to harm you. If he had easily betrayed you, perhaps you would’ve been more willing to return to the Capital City with me.” Su Liang sighed softly, “So that’s it.”

“What does Miss Su think of this?” Mu Fei looked at Su Liang and asked.

Su Liang turned her head to look at Ning Jing.

Mu Fei’s eyes flickered, ‘Miss Su isn’t willing to leave Young Master Ning?’

Ning Jing seemed absorbed in the Buddhist Scriptures, as if he didn’t care about what was happening.

Su Liang looked back at Mu Fei and forced a bitter smile, “Master Mu guessed it right.”

Mu Fei was taken aback for a moment, “Aren’t you sworn siblings?”

Su Liang bandaged Mu Fei's wound, "I assume Master Mu is aware of the time we pretended to get married. That time, he saved me out of kindness and I developed feelings for him, but he only sees me as his sister. That's why we became siblings."

Ning Jing's hand, flipping through the scriptures, paused for a moment.

Mu Fei frowned, "You mean you like Ning Jing, but he doesn't like you, and yet you still want to follow him?"

"As the saying goes, 'Familiarity breeds affection.' Perhaps I can wait until he changes his mind?" Su Liang sighed.

"Miss Su, you might be feeling gratitude towards him and are temporarily lost in it. Such humbleness is not worth it." Mu Fei said.

Su Liang shook her head, "I'm willing."

Mu Fei: ...

Chang'an couldn't help but speak up, "Is Miss Su unwilling to return to the capital with my master? Is chasing after Young Master Ning more important than avenging your family members?"

"I can't remember the past, but regarding revenge..." Su Liang frowned, "If they are indeed wronged, I naturally want to find out the truth and clear their names. "

"In a few days, you will follow me back to the capital, and I'll help you." Mu Fei's expression brightened.

Su Liang changed the subject, "I will go to the capital, but not now. If I follow the fourth prince back, people will surely suspect that we plotted together." "When are you planning to return to the capital?" Mu Fei asked.

"When Ning Jing passes the imperial examination, and after the New Year, I'll go with him to the capital for the exams." Su Liang said.

Mu Fei snorted, "In the end, you still can't let go of him."

"It's only a few more months. And you, Master Mu, must have important matters to deal with. I guess you can't help me clear my name right now." Su Liang said.

After a moment of silence, Mu Fei asked again, "Will you really go to the capital?"

Su Liang nodded, "As long as Ning Jing passes the examination, I'll definitely go."

Mu Fei blurted out, "What do you like about him, anyway?"

Su Liang sighed deeply, "I just like being ignored by him. Maybe one day he will notice me and start taking care of me, and then I might find him boring and stop liking him. "

Ning Jing's hand, flipping the scripture, paused for a moment again.

Chang'an's mouth twitched uncontrollably, and he looked at Su Liang like she was a girl who was clearly out of her mind.

Mu Fei was speechless, deeply suspecting that Su Liang was just rambling and trying to fool him....

Chapter 45: 045. Military Exam

[Martial Exam]

Su Liang bandaged Mu Fei's wound and planned to write a prescription.

Just as she took out the writing materials from the medicine box Ning Jing had made with his own hands, he put down the Buddhist Scripture and reached out his hand.

Su Liang naturally handed over the paper and pen and explained to Mu Fei's puzzled face, "My handwriting is ugly, and he dislikes it."

Mu Fei: ...

But Su Liang had already guessed whose handwriting Ning Jing had found for her and why he didn't let her write in front of others.

Su Liang loved that book of handwriting and had put a lot of effort into practicing the characters, which have now become quite decent.

However, Ning Jing had used the papers she practiced on to start fires...

Even if Ning Jing had not stopped her, she would have changed her font when writing herself.

Su Liang recited, and Ning Jing wrote down the prescription, handing it to Chang'an.

"If you don't trust me, you can ask another doctor to check." Su Liang said.

The fourth prince had made sufficient preparations for his safety in his undercover mission.

Although such accidents could not be completely avoided now, even if Su Liang hadn't been there, someone else would have treated Mu Fei.

Obviously, Mu Fei chose to let Su Liang treat him, firstly because his injury was not severe, and secondly, to take the opportunity to test Su Liang's medical skills and attitude towards him, and also to highlight the purpose of his visit to Su Liang.

Ning Jing packed up the medicine box, carried it on his back, and showed no intention of sitting back down.

So Su Liang said goodbye, "If Sir Mu has no other orders, we'll leave first."

"Miss Su has worked hard. I will visit you to express my gratitude another day.

Chang'an, see them off." Mu Fei leaned back on the bed, smiling and nodding. The weakness caused by the injury had reduced the cunning calculation in his eyes, revealing some warmth and kindness.

Through the half-open window, Mu Fei watched Su Liang and Ning Jing walk one after the other to the red maple tree and stop almost simultaneously.

After that, Ning Jing pointed to the reddest maple leaf at the top of the tree, and Su Liang quietly climbed up...

“What is she doing? Miss Su looks soft and weak, yet she can climb trees?” asked Chang’an, dumbfounded.

Mu Fei’s eyes widened in surprise, “After all, she lived in the mountain village for a year, and it’s not strange that she can climb trees. But there are no fruits on this tree.”

Watching Su Liang pick a few maple leaves and hand them to Ning Jing, Chang’an suddenly realized, “Prince Ning likes tree leaves, so Miss Su climbed up to pick them for him! They have such tacit understanding, they don’t even need to speak to know each other’s intentions!”

When his words fell, he didn’t hear a response from Mu Fei, so Chang’an turned his head and saw him withdrawing his gaze. Mu Fei then spoke with a hint of sarcasm, “It seems that I was too friendly with Su Liang? If I ignore her, will she fall in love with me instead?”

Chang’an considered it seriously for a while and shook his head, “Master, Miss Su lives with Prince Ning, so even if he doesn’t talk to her, they see each other day and night. But if Master doesn’t actively seek Miss Su out, she won’t even see the master, let alone fall for him.”

Mu Fei’s forehead twitched, “That woman was talking nonsense just now. But it seems that she really likes Ning Jing. Do you think she can be useful to me?” “If Miss Su wants to avenge her family, she can only cooperate with Master to have a chance.” Chang’an said.

“Cooperate...” Mu Fei snorted, “So soon, you think she is capable of negotiating with me?”

Chang’an furrowed his brows, “Subordinate didn’t mean that, it’s just...”

Mu Fei shook his head, “No need to explain. Since Ning Jing told her about the sedatives earlier, she must have asked him about Su Yuanzhou’s family.” Chang’an froze, “Master means, she was pretending to be surprised just now?”

Mu Fei narrowed his eyes and looked out the window again. Su Liang was gone, “Today, I invited her here, but she probably already knew what was going to happen when she chose to come. Even the assassin might have been set free by her intentionally.”

“Subordinate doesn’t understand about the assassin...” Continued Chang’an, confused.

“She guessed that I wanted to use her against Second Royal Brother. She didn’t know the assassin at all, and suddenly jumped out to save people, perhaps to test her value to me.” Mu Fei’s eyes were deep.

Chang’an frowned, “Subordinate really didn’t realize that her calculations were so deep.”

“She said she would go to the capital but refused to go with me because she didn’t want to be my pawn.” Mu Fei sneered, “To be honest, if she agreed to go back to the capital with me so easily, she would only be worth being a pawn.” “So, will Master let her be?” Chang’an asked.

Mu Fei pondered for a moment, “It’s better if she’s smart since we have to deal with the Second Royal Brother. After all, some things must be done without my involvement. We’re just calculating

each other. As she said, I have more important things to deal with, so Su Family's affairs can wait until next year."

"But Prince Ning will most likely be implicated by Bei Jingwang Mansion if he takes the Imperial examination once he enters the Capital, considering the Emperor's attitude towards the mansion," said Chang'an.

The glint in Mu Fei's eyes flickered, "That's not a bad thing. If Ning Jing doesn't get a fair opportunity because of Bei Jingwang Mansion, it's a perfect opportunity for me to win him over."

"Master, it's better to be cautious. Somehow, I always feel that Ning Jing is difficult to fathom," said Chang'an.

Mu Fei shook his head, "Don't forget, Ning Jing wasn't recruited by Bei Jingwang, but was merely Xing Yusheng's friend. When he first said that they had met by chance and that Xing Yusheng had helped him out of kindness, it might have been true. Now that Xing Yusheng is trapped in the capital as a hostage, Ning Jing will have to find another backer to achieve his goals."

Su Liang and Ning Jing didn't just leave Ling Mountain Temple immediately. Since they came to the temple, they had a good tour of the place.

Before leaving, Su Liang went to the main hall to offer incense for the Original Master and her family.

As they left Ling Mountain Temple, Su Liang sighed lightly, "When I go to the capital, I will find out the truth and avenge Su Yuanzhou's family. I'm not opposed to cooperating with Mu Fei, but I cannot be his pawn. Young Master Xing seems to be in no position to help himself, and I don't understand why you are taking the Imperial examination. Now I need to practice martial arts well. If I can make a name for myself in the Martial Exam, I will have the capital to talk to some people."

Ning Jing nodded slightly.

Suddenly, Su Liang let go of him and ran swiftly down the mountain road.

With the cool breeze brushing against her face, she felt a sense of vastness in the empty forest, as if she were the only one left in the world.

Ning Jing slowly walked down the mountain, only to see Su Liang sitting on a dead tree at the mountain's foot, waiting for him.

She raised her head, squinting at the colourful afterglow in the horizon, the setting sun casting a faint blush on her fair cheeks.

Ning Jing walked over and gently patted Su Liang's head.

Su Liang jumped down from the dead tree, the previous laziness vanishing as she clenched her fists and said, "I have to practice martial arts well. You have to teach me seriously!"

The first time she mentioned the Military Exam, she did it casually without a real plan.

This time, Su Liang was serious. She had always believed that since she had taken over the original owner's body, she must do things that the identity entitled her to do.

If Su Yuanzhou's family had been wronged and killed, then revenge was her obligation.

If the enemy was the second prince, a weak woman with no influence like her had no means to talk about revenge.

Relying on the Fourth Prince, Duanmu Chen, might not necessarily end up with the outcome she wanted. After all, Duanmu Chen's purpose for approaching her couldn't be simple kindness to avenge the Su family.

Besides, she needed martial arts for self-protection; otherwise, a weak woman in such a strict hierarchy would have nowhere to go.

Ning Jing nodded again.

"If Bei Jingwang's Mansion falls this year, will it affect your path to the Imperial Examination?" Su Liang asked Ning Jing.

Ning Jing didn't know when he had picked up a dry branch and wrote on the ground, "No problem."

"Right, Mu Fei's forehead..." Su Liang suddenly remembered.

Ning Jing shook his head indicating it didn't exist anymore.

"I see. I just don't know who that rescued assassin is. If I fight with her, what are my chances of winning?" Su Liang asked. Ning Jing wrote, "Five."

Su Liang also thought it was about the same.

The two of them completed another "task." As it was getting late, they planned to return to the village early the next morning.

Before they reached the front door, they heard familiar wailing.

Old lady Niu and her family were kneeling in the alley, clearly begging them to save Su Xingzhe, refusing to get up until they agreed.

Su Liang and Ning Jing bypassed the back door, packed their things, and drove the carriage out of the county town back to the village.

The next day, Chang'an visited with a gift to say thanks. With no one answering the door, he learned from the neighbors that they had left the night before, so he went back to report.

Mu Fei didn't understand why Ning Jing and Su Liang went back to the village. "Can it be that he doesn't intend to go to Qianshan Academy? You should go there once and find out."

It was only two months until the Provincial Exam; scholars going to Qianshan Academy had to leave these days.

Su Family village.

Early in the morning, Su Liang got up to exercise, and after breakfast, she asked Ning Jing to practice with her.

During the break, Su Liang asked him, "If we practice until next March, do you think I have a chance to be in the top three of the Military Exam?"

Ning Jing nodded, "Do not slack off."

Determined, Su Liang said, "Alright! Then please teach me well!"

Qian Country capital city.

Nian Jincheng opened the door to see Nian Ruxue standing outside, staring blankly at the old pine tree in the courtyard.

"Xuexue, are you looking for me?" Nian Jincheng asked.

Without turning her head, Nian Ruxue sighed softly, "The first time I saw him, he was standing under that tree."

Nian Jincheng frowned, "Father has given up on forcing you to become the Crown Prince's Imperial Concubine, but you must forget about that man!"

"Second Brother, I have withdrawn the task from Yanyun Building." Nian Ruxue turned around and looked at Nian Jincheng.

Nian Jincheng's expression softened, and he sighed, "That's good."

"If I could withdraw it, it means that Yanyun Building hasn't found him yet." Nian Ruxue said.

Nian Jincheng's expression became serious, "Xuexue! Even if you don't enter the Crown Prince Mansion, you have no say in your marriage!"

"I know." Nian Ruxue gently nodded, a bitter smile flashing across her lips, "That's why I came to see you, Second Brother. I have decided to participate in the Military Exam. If I can win the top place, I will ask the Emperor for the freedom to choose my own marriage."

Nian Jincheng was stunned, "The Military Exam? Your martial arts skills are average, and it's too late to start practicing now."

"Second Brother, you can help me improve, can't you? You were a Martial Arts

Champion in the last exam." Nian Ruxue shook Nian Jincheng's arm, "Second Brother, please, you don't want me to be manipulated and marry someone you don't like, do you?"

Nian Jincheng pondered for a moment, then nodded in agreement, "Alright. I'll try my best. Regardless of the result of the Military Exam, you'll still have some ability to protect yourself. But if you complain about the difficulty and fatigue, then forget it!"

"Don't worry, Second Brother, I won't. Since I want to do this, I must become the Martial Arts Champion!" Nian Ruxue's eyes were filled with determination..

Chapter 46: 046. You should go too.

[You go too]

Chang'an arrived at Su Family's village on official orders just after noon. There was a commotion outside Su Liang's house, with many people gathered around.

As he approached, he saw an old rope hanging from an old elm tree outside the front door, with a knot tied in it. An elderly woman wearing tattered clothes was standing on a stone, attempting to hang herself.

Several young men and women near her were crying and pleading, saying things like "Mother, don't do something foolish" and "What are we going to do if you die?"

Unfortunately, several strong young men couldn't pull the old woman down. She kept trying to put her neck into the rope but couldn't quite manage it.

There were villagers around who were trying to help, and others were egging her on, urging her to hurry up if she really intended to hang herself and not dawdle.

Chang'an knew that these were Su Xingzhe's family members. They had no ability to clear his name, so they had decided to make a scene outside Su Liang's house, playing a perfect card of moral blackmail.

Meanwhile, the front door of Su Liang's house was tightly shut, with two children sitting by the door, leaning their heads together and playing with stones.

When Chang'an walked over, the slightly older child looked guardedly at him and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm here on orders from the County Magistrate to see Young Master Ning Jing," Chang'an deliberately lowered his voice.

The child looked to the side, and an old woman wearing clean, simple clothes immediately pulled him aside and gestured for Chang'an to knock on the door himself.

Since it was so noisy outside, it took a while for the door to open after Chang'an knocked.

The child yelled, "Sister Su Liang!"

The door opened quickly, and Chang'an slipped inside just before the family running over from outside. He quickly bolted the door from the inside.

However, it wasn't Su Liang who opened the door, but Ning Jing. She hadn't even removed the apron she'd been wearing while doing the dishes. Caught off guard, Chang'an asked, "Young Master Ning, what's going on..." "What is it?" Ning Jing asked indifferently.

"I'm here on Master Mai Fei's orders to deliver a thank-you gift to Miss Su. I went to your county town residence first, but no one was there." Chang'an explained, looking around.

Once-empty courtyard was now planted with trees and some unrecognizable decorations. It was Su Liang's makeshift practice arena.

"Is Miss Su at home?" Chang'an asked.

Su Liang came out of the house. She had changed into more formal clothes for the occasion, even though she usually wore comfortable and practical clothes at home.

“Miss Su, this is a thank-you gift from my Master. Please accept it.” Chang’an placed the gift boxes he had brought on the stone table in the courtyard. Su Liang nodded, “All right. Is there anything else?”

Ning Jing had already returned to the kitchen, and now Chang’an felt that this quiet, rustic farmhouse was worlds apart from the tumult outside.

“Do you need help dealing with the family causing trouble?” Chang’an asked. This wasn’t part of the instructions from Mai Fei, but he asked it subconsciously.

Su Liang shook her head, “No need. If they don’t get what they want, they’ll leave.”

For cases like these, the best approach was to ignore them. Giving them even a glance would be a waste of time.

“Actually...” Chang’an asked about his curiosity, “If Miss Su truly wants to save Su Xingzhe, there might still be a chance.”

“Is this something your Master asked you to inquire about?” Su Liang countered.

Chang’an hurriedly shook his head, “No, Miss Su, don’t misunderstand, I was just...”

“Do you think I have a Bodhisattva’s heart?” Su Liang asked.

Chang’an forced a smile, “After all, Miss Su can even save unfamiliar assassins.”

“Is there anything wrong with me being willing to save that assassin and watch Su Xingzhe suffer the consequences of his actions?” Su Liang asked.

“No, I just misspoke.” Chang’an quickly apologized with a smile. Although Su Liang was standing several meters away with a calm expression and tone, he had felt a strange sense of pressure from her just a moment ago. He finally remembered what he was supposed to ask, “When will Young Master Ning be heading to Qianshan Academy? Will Miss Su be accompanying him to the provincial city?”

Su Liang shook her head, “We’re not going.”

Chang’an was surprised, “Why not? It’s a rare opportunity. If Young Master Ning can study at Qianshan Academy for a while, it would surely help with the Provincial Exam. ”

“We had a master calculate that the Feng Shui here is excellent. If we stay here longer, our future will be prosperous,” Su Liang said, deadpan.

Chang’an’s mouth twitched, “I see. I won’t disturb you any longer. If you need help with anything in the future, you can find me at the county government.”

Su Liang nodded, “Take care.”

Chang'an opened the door, slipped out, and quickly pulled it shut from the outside. Only after hearing the bolt slide from the inside did he let go.

The farce continued outside—the old woman named Niu Pozi had yet to hang herself, and many of the onlookers were growing bored and leaving.

Su Bai had come by, tried to persuade Su Xingzhe's family members not to leave, but didn't bother Su Liang and Ning Jing. He said that Su Xingzhe's fate was set in stone and that he would no longer be involved in Niu Pozi's family affairs in the future.

Separated by just a wall, Su Liang and Ning Jing were unaffected.

Su Liang practiced martial arts in the morning and read and practiced calligraphy in the afternoon.

Ning Jing cleaned up half of the firewood room, turned it into his woodworking workshop, and spent quite some time in there. Su Liang didn't ask what he was doing.

In the afternoon, Ning Jing also left the house through the back wall, went up the mountain to cut grass and feed the horses, and picked a few wild fruits along the way, washing them and giving half to Su Liang.

Because of Zhuzi's illness, the Bai Family had sold several acres of land previously. Recently, Zhuzi's health had improved, and they had made some money thanks to Su Liang's help. They bought back the land they had sold.

The men from the Bai Family had gone to work the fields, leaving only Bai Da Niang and the two children at home. Since Niu Pozi's family started causing trouble, they had volunteered to guard the front door for Su Liang.

The disturbance continued until nightfall when Niu Pozi was finally "persuaded" to go home by her children, and the crowd dispersed.

Among the thank-you gifts from Chang'an were fabrics, desserts, and a set of silver jewelry with excellent craftsmanship.

However, Su Liang had no intention of wearing it, finding it cumbersome, so she put it away in a cabinet.

After dinner, hearing the quiet outside, Su Liang took two boxes of desserts to the Bai Family as a thank-you. Ning Jing went back into the firewood room.

"Sister Su Liang, I can run three laps now!" Zhuzi puffed out his little chest proudly. His thin and pale face was now fleshy, and Su Liang pinched it, praising him for being great.

The dessert boxes were what Bai Da Niang had seen Chang'an carrying earlier in the day. She had refused to take them from him, but Su Liang insisted they would not be able to finish them all.

In the end, they accepted the money, as Su Liang asked them for a favor.

"Uncle Bai said that since we're living in the village and Ning Jing got the top score in the Court Examination, it's a great joy that we must invite our fellow villagers to a

feast. We don't know the rules in this aspect, so please help us with the arrangements, and we will not skimp on the fees." Su Liang said.

Su Bai thought that Ning Jing would go to Qianshan Academy soon and wouldn't live in the village anymore, but Ning Jing and Su Liang came back.

Although Ning Jing wasn't a local, he is now considered half a villager.

Getting the top score in the examination is a huge celebration for the whole village. If it were any other village, a feast would have been arranged.

Moreover, because Su Xingzhe brought shame to the village, there was an even greater need for Ning Jing to restore the village's reputation. Otherwise, it would seem that the village values Su Xingzhe more, because they didn't even let Ning Jing celebrate his success when he was in trouble.

This wasn't a small matter. Su Bai didn't want the future generations of the village who also study to be associated with Su Xingzhe, who had his head chopped off for cheating in the Imperial examination. If they had to mention someone, it should be Ning Jing.

Old Man Bai knocked his pipe on the table leg and nodded, "It's a great joy for any family to celebrate such an achievement. We must hold a banquet! Don't mention the fees, Liang girl, we're here to share in the joy! If the harvest is good next year, we'll send Little Tiger and Zhuzi to study too!"

Liu family's expressions brightened, as they naturally hoped their own sons would become successful.

It was soon decided that Su Liang would buy a big fat pig raised by the Bai family, and hold a banquet the day after tomorrow to invite fellow villagers to the feast.

"What if that old woman from the Niu family comes to make a fuss? I'm not afraid of them; I just find them annoying!" Granny Bai said.

"I think Uncle Bai will handle this matter well." Su Liang said.

As she was about to leave, Bai Xiaohu chased after her, "Sister Su Liang, when are we going to hunt wild boars in the mountains?"

Su Liang slapped her forehead, "I completely forgot. Let's say the day after tomorrow? If the weather is good."

Bai Xiaohu jumped up excitedly, "It will definitely be good weather!"

County government office.

When Chang'an saw Mai Fei again, it was already very late.

After hearing Chang'an's account of seeing Su Liang, Mai Fei snorted, "Good Feng Shui? She's just talking nonsense."

"Miss Su... is very strange. She seems so sincere, yet suddenly says things that are irrelevant." Chang'an said.

Mai Fei said thoughtfully, “She is sincerely brushing us off because she was asked about things she shouldn’t have been. For example, her relationship with Ning Jing and why she didn’t save Su Xingzhe. The former is irrelevant to my purpose for finding her, and the latter has nothing to do with you. So even if we realize she is talking nonsense, it won’t affect anything important.”

Chang’an’s expression changed, “She knows the identity of the master, but she doesn’t feel inferior in front of him; and she doesn’t seem superior when facing me. I’ve never met anyone like that.”

Mai Fei pondered, “Indeed. You go to Su Village again tomorrow and give her five thousand taels of silver notes. Say it’s for her trip to the capital city.”

Chang’an was surprised, then heard Mai Fei say, “She’s a talented person. Better to win her over first. If she goes to the capital city, there may be a great use for her.”

Who knows what Su Bai said to the children of Old Lady Niu, but the next morning, Old Lady Niu was locked up in her house and couldn’t get out.

Anyone with a clear mind would know that Su Xingzhe couldn’t be saved. Even if his life was spared, it would be impossible for him to be allowed to participate in the Imperial examination again. So, what’s the use of bringing back a useless person who can’t carry or lift? Causing more trouble wouldn’t do them any good, and offending Su Liang and Ning Jing would be even more foolish.

When the villagers learned that Ning Jing was hosting a banquet, everyone who could help came.

An improvised stove was dug in the open space between Granny Bai’s house and Su Liang’s house, and a simple shed was set up for cooking. The tables and chairs would be brought by each household the next morning and taken back after the feast was over.

When Chang’an, sent once again by Mai Fei, found Su Liang, she was standing side by side with Ning Jing, watching the pig being killed.

Chang’an also heard Su Liang ask Ning Jing if he wanted to try killing a pig. Ning Jing said no because the squealing was too noisy...

Su Liang accepted the money from Mai Fei for their trip to the capital city but reciprocated with a piece of fresh pork, with a nice balance of fat and meat, which had just been killed.

Carrying the pork, Chang’an left, thinking that his master would be “very happy” when he saw it.

Su Liang took some clean pig blood and offal back home and made a bowl of spicy Mao Xuewang for dinner.

Ning Jing initially refused to try it, but seeing Su Liang eating, he gave it a taste. Then he told Su Liang that they should share it equally since she had already eaten a lot...

Today was just the preparation day, killing the pig and making the dishes, Su Liang and Ning Jing didn’t participate.

On the day of the banquet, Su Liang went to help cook.

After the feast started, Ning Jing, as the protagonist, was escorted by Su Bai to toast each table. Although he was quiet and didn’t smile, he showed no sign of discomfort when people patted him on the shoulder.

After a day, Su Liang felt tired but quite interested as she had experienced an authentic ancient feast.

The leftover dishes were distributed to the villagers. That evening, Bai He calculated the accounts and returned any unspent money to Su Liang.

The day they had agreed to go hunting for wild boar in the mountains turned out to be raining.

Soon afterwards, Hu Er arrived with many gifts to congratulate Ning Jing on his success.

“Last night, no one knew how, but the wall of the County Prison collapsed. Two guards were killed, and several death row prisoners, including Su Xingzhe from your village, escaped!” Hu Er sighed, “The news reached the town early in the morning, causing panic among the people. You guys should be careful too.”

Su Liang felt that something was fishy, “How could Su Xingzhe, a weak scholar, escape and not be caught?”

“That’s what’s so strange! I think this is aimed at the new County Magistrate! When death row inmates escape, it’s his responsibility, and if someone dies, he can’t escape the blame!” said Hu Er.

Su Liang’s heart sank. Hu Er might have guessed right.

Duanmu Chen came to investigate the iron mine smuggling, and those behind the scenes would do everything they can to distract him.

In front of huge interests, the two forces, who really cares about the well-being of the common people?

The previously silent Ning Jing suddenly asked, “Is there a reward?”

Hu Er was stunned for a moment, then shook his head and nodded, “I didn’t see it before I left, but with such a big event, there must be a reward notice!” Ning Jing picked up a book again.

When Hu Er left, Ning Jing put down the book and said to Su Liang, “It’s an opportunity to make money.”

“You want to catch escaped convicts?” Su Liang asked. Ning Jing nodded, “You go too. You’ll take care of the fights..”

Chapter 47: 047. Aren ‘t you going?

[Won’t you go?]

The cold wind whistled, and the rain was continuous.

Mai Fei stood by the window with his hands behind his back, his face even darker than the sky.

Yesterday, he had asked Chang’an to send Su Liang 5,000 taels, and the “return gift” he received was a piece of fresh pork. He had the servants cook it, but the taste was quite ordinary. It wasn’t the meat’s fault, but the cook’s skill was not good enough.

Therefore, last night, Mai Fei told Chang'an that he planned to visit Su Family

Village today to see just how good the Feng Shui was, making Ning Jing and Su Liang unwilling to leave. More importantly, if he went, for the sake of the 5,000 taels, Su Liang should at least treat him to a meal.

Unexpectedly, a major incident occurred in the County Prison.

Mai Fei was the County Magistrate on the surface but was investigating the iron smuggling case in secret. Recently, there had been significant clues, and someone was desperate.

The prison wall had been deliberately demolished, and the escaped prisoners had all been helped by someone.

What Su Liang said to Hu Er, that Su Xingzhe was too weak to run out or get far, was not the problem.

Even if the wall had collapsed, the prisoners held by iron chains should not have been able to escape.

However, the fact was that no matter whether those prisoners wanted to or could escape, someone would "help" them.

The biggest problem was what the person behind the scenes would "help" those prisoners do next...

Chang'an rushed in to report, "Master, there is another family in the south of the city that reported a break-in before dawn, and money was stolen. Two people were also killed."

The chill in Mai Fei's eyes intensified. "Has the reward been issued?"

Chang'an nodded, "As Master instructed, 500 taels for providing clues and assisting in the capture, and 1,000 taels for directly capturing a prisoner and sending them back. With great rewards come brave men!"

In Bei'an County, this was a rare, generous reward.

However, Mai Fei shook his head, not optimistic about the situation.

During the day, the rain was not heavy, but Bei'an County town and the surrounding villages that received the news had their doors tightly closed, and most businesses on the streets remained closed.

No one went out, and only a few people saw the posted rewards.

Government soldiers were divided into several teams, investigating house by house, and at the same time, verbally informing the residents of the hefty rewards.

However, half a day had passed, and those prisoners who had been tortured in prison and were physically weak, and should not have been able to run far, could not be found.

From last night to this noon, there were five murder cases in the county town, all involving robbery and murder, in five different locations.

The number of incidents matched the number of escaped prisoners.

If ordinary people encountered this situation without knowing the inside story, they would inevitably be dissatisfied with the newly appointed County Magistrate.

However, Mai Fei was not worried about what the common people thought, but rather that innocent people had died, and in the future, he would be criticized by his political opponents, such as the second prince.

If, in the end, he had exhausted his efforts to crack the iron smuggling case, but because he couldn't even manage a County Magistrate position well, causing a heavy loss of life to the common people, he would be very upset.

In the rainsoaked and heavily guarded city, the appearance of Ning Jing and Su Liang's carriage at the city gate seemed a bit abrupt.

Someone ordered the carriage to stop, and when the approaching government soldier recognized Ning Jing's face, he was stunned. "Isn't this Young Master Ning?"

As the first-place scholar in this year's Court Examination, and with an extraordinary appearance and temperament, most people knew what Ning Jing looked like after walking around the county town a few days ago.

Ning Jing lifted the rain shield slightly and asked what had happened.

The soldier knew his importance and did not dare to offend. He told them about the escaped prisoners who had committed murder.

"Try not to walk around outside. If you have any clues, please be sure to inform the county government!"

Ning Jing nodded, pressed down the rain shield again, and urged the carriage to continue forward.

He and Su Liang had heard about this matter from Hu Er and left Su Family Village for the county town.

Since it was raining, walking or riding horses was inconvenient, and suddenly disappearing from the village might cause unnecessary misunderstandings, so they took a carriage into the city.

"Five prisoners, five robberies and killings, and all the culprits escaped successfully. This is definitely someone's design. Not to mention Su Xingzhe, he is not capable of doing this." J Su Liang's voice came from the carriage.

She thought that the real culprits behind the murder and panic were probably not the prisoners. They were just tools and cover for someone else.

When Ning Jing came to the city, he saw the government soldiers and reported the matter to Chang'an. When Chang'an met Mai Fei again, he mentioned it.

Mai Fei fixed his gaze, "I was just looking for him!" "Let me invite Young Master Ning!" Chang'an said.

"If Su Liang is with him, call her too." Mai Fei ordered.

Ning Jing and Su Liang arrived at the county town house. As they were planning their next move, they heard someone knocking on the door.

“Young Master Ning, my master invites you!” Chang’an got straight to the point, and when he saw Su Liang appear in the corridor, he said loudly, “Master invites Miss Su as well!”

Su Liang was a bit puzzled. It would be unusual for Mai Fei to be relaxed enough to talk to them about something not very urgent.

They followed Chang’an to the County Government where Mai Fei lived in the back mansion.

As soon as they entered, they saw seven or eight common people kneeling in the rain, their faces blurred by the constant kowtows, unable to distinguish between tears and raindrops.

Cries and pleas were interwoven with the sound of rain, bringing sadness to those who heard them.

Chang’an was also stunned, not knowing what was going on with these people, and hurriedly led Ning Jing and Su Liang around them.

The door was open, and Mai Fei sat in the shadows, holding a semi-wet letter in his hand, his face as gloomy as the ink spreading on paper.

“Master, Ning Jing and Miss Su are here.” Chang’an said respectfully.

Mai Fei looked over, put down the letter in his hand, and gestured for Chang’an to leave.

Chang’an went outside, closed the doors and windows, frowned at the kneeling people in the courtyard, and called a guard to a corner to inquire in a low voice.

“They arrived as soon as you left, they are the families of the top three scholars in this year’s Court Examination.”

“The three scholars who set off yesterday for the Provincial City’s Qianshan Academy have all been captured!”

“The three families received letters from the kidnappers, written by the scholars themselves and stamped with blood handprints.”

Chang’an frowned as he listened, “What does the letter say?”

The guard’s face turned ugly, “It says to exchange the master’s head for the lives of the three scholars.”

In the room, Mai Fei showed the letter to Su Liang and Ning Jing, asking for their opinions.

“The three literati who set off yesterday, no matter how slow they walked, could not be caught up by the escaped convicts last night. Moreover, they committed murder in the city, came out of the city to catch people, and then sent the letter to the three families early in the morning.” J Su Liang said, “This is someone’s premeditated plan. Lord Mai, you don’t expect us to help, do you?”

However, Mai Fei nodded, “Yes.”

Su Liang was puzzled, but Mai Fei turned to Ning Jing, "I'll ask you one more time, did you get Xing Yusheng's token merely because he happened to be in Bei'an County, and you just happened to meet him by chance?"

The one who answered was Su Liang, "Actually, the token was given to me." Mai Fei frowned, "What do you mean? Explain clearly."

"The crown prince Xing Yusheng is seriously ill and recuperating at Qiuming Manor. We got to know each other because of the former County Magistrate's daughter, Huang Wanwan. I treated him, and that token was a thank-you gift," Su Liang said.

Not to clear the relationship with Xing Yusheng, but the fact was just like that.

Mai Fei knew about Huang Wanwan because he had asked Chang'an to investigate Xing Yusheng's activities in Bei'an County. It was after Su Liang went to the county government to report Huang Wanwan that they had contact with Qiuming Manor.

Su Liang's words could be completely matched.

Otherwise, if Ning Jing had been a member of Bei Jingwang Mansion long ago, he would not have signed up only half a month before the examination.

"I thought Ning Jing was Xing Yusheng's good friend, but it turns out it's you." Mai Fei rubbed his forehead, "You are really good to Ning Jing."

Su Liang guessed the reason why Mai Fei came to them. The iron mine smuggling case might have something to do with Bei Jingwang. The chaos in Bei'an County from last night till now must have something to do with the smuggling charges Mai Fei wanted to investigate.

If Mai Fei suspected that Ning Jing had a close relationship with Bei Jingwang Mansion, he would have asked Su Liang to come along and was ready to have a good "chat" with them.

But Su Liang didn't ask. As long as Ning Jing could remain silent, he would not speak.

Knowing the beginning and end of their relationship with Xing Yusheng, Mai Fei no longer explained why he was looking for them.

"Do you have a solution to the current situation?" Mai Fei asked.

Ning Jing stood up, "No, goodbye."

Su Liang quickly reacted, got up, and said, "Magistrate Mai, we can't be of any help, so we won't bother you." She hurriedly left following Ning Jing.

Mai Fei watched the two of them leave with an umbrella, looking like they didn't want to be bothered, even if there was something important they had no time for.

Chang'an entered, "Master, what should we do about the three scholars?"

If the top three of the Bei'an County Court Examination were all killed, it would be very troublesome.

Mai Fei said coldly, "I have sent someone to call for soldiers, but I'm afraid it might be too late."

The man behind the scenes knew Mai Fei's identity. He could not risk his life to exchange for the three scholars. Even if the three scholars were still alive, they would not live much longer.

Since arriving in Bei'an County, the secret investigation had not encountered much resistance.

Only today did Mai Fei learn that it was because he had not found anything earlier, and the man behind the scene was observing.

As soon as he found some important clues, something happened immediately. Whether it had anything to do with Bei Jingwang was not yet certain. Mai Fei hoped that Ning Jing was a newcomer recruited by Bei Jingwang. In that case, he could turn Ning Jing against them and get some useful information. The families of the three scholars were still crying for Mai Fei to save them, and a woman fainted.

Mai Fei let Chang'an find a place to settle them down. He looked at the dark clouds gathering in the sky and finally realized the difficulty of this errand.

Ning Jing came by carriage, and after leaving the county government, he got in the carriage and let Su Liang drive.

As the carriage slowly moved away, Su Liang asked softly, 'What should we

They came to arrest the death row prisoners, but they couldn't cooperate with Mai Fei openly, because some secrets couldn't be exposed in front of Mai Fei.

"Find a hidden place," Ning Jing said.

Su Liang understood, driving the carriage into the nearest alley. When she spoke again, she got no answer. Pulling back the curtain, Ning Jing had disappeared.

Su Liang didn't look for him, knowing that he must have discovered something or thought of a solution.

She drove the carriage alone across the alleys, returned to their home in the county town, closed the door, and waited for Ning Jing to return.

About an hour and a half later, Ning Jing finally returned.

He took off the coarse cloth coat he had found somewhere and threw it into the backyard.

Su Liang handed him a cup of hot tea, and before she could ask anything, there was a knock on the door.

It was Chang'an again. Seeing Su Liang quickly opening the door, he looked at her and saw Ning Jing sitting by the window drinking tea.

"Magistrate Mai has new instructions?" Su Liang asked.

Chang'an quickly looked away and saluted, "Half an hour ago, those three scholars were found! It was the arrest officer who was bribed. Yesterday, he represented the county government in sending the scholars out of town and drugged their food. He kidnapped them and hid them in his own house."

Su Liang was surprised, "How did you find out?"

“The arrest officer suddenly said he had a stomachache and wanted to go home, but he was caught with a broken neck at his doorstep! As soon as we received the news, we rushed over, and although we didn’t find the killer in his house, we found the three scholars and many unidentified properties.”

Su Liang sighed, “It’s too dangerous, and I don’t know which hero saved them in time.”

She knew in her heart that Chang’an suddenly appeared because Mai Fei was suspicious of their involvement in the arrest officer’s death.

“That’s right,” Chang’an nodded.

“The iron mine smuggling has huge profits and is tempting. It’s not necessarily just the arrest officer who was bribed.” Su Liang thought about it and reminded Chang’an, “It’s worth checking the prison officers who were on duty last night and were not killed.”

Chang’an’s expression changed, “There were two who were injured but not killed... I’ll take my leave!”

As Chang’an hurried away on horseback, Su Liang closed the door and returned to the room.

Without asking, she knew that Ning Jing must have guessed that someone from the county government had been bribed and involved. At this time, those “ghosts” would inevitably want to kill people.

Ning Jing could use his special abilities to detect the murderer.

Fortunately, the three scholars were still alive. Before Ning Jing took action to kill, he must have determined their whereabouts, and even the sudden return of the arrest officer to his home was likely caused by Ning Jing’s secret actions. “Didn’t we agree that I would fight?” Su Liang sat down. “You solved it all by yourself.”

Ning Jing closed the book, “He gave up a name.”

“Who? I’ll catch him.” Su Liang felt there was work to be done.

Ning Jing’s thin lips opened slightly, “Me.”

Su Liang: ...

“Framing you to make Mai Fei think that Bei Jingwang Mansion is behind the scenes?” Su Liang quickly guessed.

Ning Jing nodded, “The fifth house in Yumin Lane, West City, with two old locust trees at the door. Go ahead.”

“Is it the man behind the arrest officer?” Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing nodded, “Be careful.”

Su Liang looked serious, “Okay, I’ll go check it out. You’re not going?”

Ning Jing shook his head, "I'm tired."

Su Liang silently went back to the room, changed into a new set of men's clothes, covered her face with a cloth, put on a bamboo hat, opened the back door, and made sure there was no one around before walking away quickly.

A moment later, Ning Jing went out again, heading west..

Chapter 48: 048. I will watch over you

[I will watch you]

The rain showed no signs of stopping; instead, it became even heavier.

Bei'an County town as a whole presented an atmosphere of oppressive silence.

Due to her professional habits from a previous life, Su Liang successfully evaded the patrolling government soldiers and approached the fifth house in Yumin Lane as Ning Jing had mentioned.

From the outside, it didn't look any different from the neighboring houses.

Two old locust trees stood by the entrance, their leaves stripped by the wind and rain, leaving a layer of half-gray, half-green shredded leaves on the ground.

Hidden in a corner, Su Liang took a moment to think, stepped forward, grabbed the rusty copper ring on the door, and knocked hard.

After knocking more than a dozen times, there was a faint sound of footsteps coming from inside. She immediately left and hid in a nearby concealed spot.

The door opened, revealing an old man with wide eyes staring at the empty alley outside. After making sure that no one was there, he muttered something and closed the door again.

Su Liang picked up a stone and threw it hard against the door.

After waiting for a quarter of an hour with no reaction, she approached the door and knocked again.

Not waiting for someone to come out, she quietly left and went around to the back alley.

She knocked on the back door three times, but there was no response from inside.

Su Liang backed away, took a running start, and climbed over the not-so-high wall. She first found a hiding place to observe her surroundings.

It looked like an ordinary household. There were two vegetable beds in the backyard, a well, a grinding stone, and under a thatched shed, there were two large jars covered with wooden lids, but the stench was hard to disguise.

Su Liang took a closer look. If there were fermented fertilizer in the large jars, wouldn't the neighbors beat them up? The smell was so strong in the rainy weather, let alone on a sunny day when the whole alley would suffer.

Moreover, this was a county town, and the small vegetable patch didn't require much fertilizer.

Just then, a burly man entered the backyard cursing, "I'm almost suffocated by the stench of human flesh and shit! Finally, I managed to get some sleep! That old deaf bastard, always making a fuss!"

Su Liang's eyes narrowed. She finally realized the purpose of the large jars the stench was meant to cover up what they were really hiding. Even if the searching government soldiers came, they might not want to approach, let alone open the jars to look inside.

Su Liang suspected that the deceased prisoners who had "escaped" last night were inside.

As soon as the incident happened, the county town was under martial law. It would be extremely risky to smuggle a living person out. Whether it was a living or dead person, it would be difficult to hide from the strict searches.

This was a county town and every household had limited space; it wouldn't take long for them to be discovered in the cellars.

The three scholars had not been found because they were in the house of the chief of the capture squad.

But if a person was chopped up and put in a large jar with excrement, all they had to say was that the jar contained fermenting fertilizer and it would be taken away as soon as it stopped raining.

After all, manure in this world did have value.

The man pinched his nose and sat down on a chair under the thatched shed, staring at the back door.

Su Liang patiently waited for a while until the man closed his eyes and soon began snoring loudly.

Avoiding his line of sight, Su Liang quietly appeared behind him, swiftly pulling out the dagger hidden in her sleeve and viciously stabbing it into his neck. She then removed the dagger and quickly hid beside the path from which he had come from the front yard.

The man's shrill scream pierced the sky as he clutched his bleeding neck. In the process, he knocked down one of the large jars, revealing a human hand inside...

Su Liang held her breath and focused, listening to the footsteps in the front yard. There were only two people.

After all, to disguise themselves as an ordinary household, the number of people had to be reasonable. This was also something that Su Liang had calculated.

As the first person approached, Su Liang estimated the distance between them based on the sound of footsteps.

Now's the time!

She thrust her knife forward, stabbing the person in the head as they turned the corner!

Her target was the neck. Su Liang estimated the height of the person based on the man in the backyard, but this person was half a head shorter, so the dagger accurately pierced his ear!

Of course, the one assigned to guard the back door wasn't the boss, it was the one who covered their ears and immediately let go, swinging their knife towards Su Liang.

As for the third person, he was the old man guarding the front door.

Usually, this was a family of an old father and two unmarried sons.

Although they had fought with Hu Er's followers and Young Master Huang's henchmen, those people were nothing but trash to Su Liang.

The scene Su Liang was facing now was her true first battle.

Even if the enemy was injured, their strength was not to be underestimated.

And that hunchbacked old man, who was trembling as he walked to open the door, suddenly straightened up, his eyes gleaming fiercely, and also attacked with a rusty axe!

Su Liang felt no fear, only a fighting spirit!

She put away her dagger, drew the long sword from her back, and for the first time, Su Liang used swordsmanship in actual combat.

When sparring with Ning Jing, Su Liang was always under pressure. At this moment, she finally understood how sharp and sophisticated this swordsmanship was.

It was the kind of feeling where every move flowed smoothly and felt useful.

Of course, this was closely related to Su Liang's extraordinary comprehension, psychological qualities, and adaptability.

The old man was stabbed in the chest by Su Liang's sword and fell to the ground, unable to get up.

As for the strongest one, who was injured by Su Liang's sneak attack, he stumbled after not much fighting and wanted to flee when he realized things weren't looking good.

Su Liang intensified her attack, aiming to incapacitate him without killing him.

Her sword pierced the man's thigh, causing him to stumble and hit the wall.

Just as Su Liang was about to rush over and deliver the finishing blow, she suddenly sensed someone approaching. Her expression changed, and as she turned her head, her arm was grabbed.

"It's time to go." Ning Jing, wearing a straw raincoat, only exposed his cold eyes as he led Su Liang from the backyard to the neighboring house, then jumped over the wall to leave.

In the pouring rain, Su Liang was pulled by Ning Jing as they sped through the alley. As they passed a corner, she looked back and saw government soldiers rushing into the alley from another direction.

As soon as Su Liang killed the first person, the noise had attracted a neighbor to report the incident to the nearby patrolling soldiers.

In this short period of time, everything had just worked out perfectly.

Su Liang never spoke, disguised as a man and wearing a mask, she wasn't worried about being exposed by the surviving man.

Most of the soldiers rushed to that house, so the two of them easily returned home. Su Liang was completely drenched, but in good spirits.

"Didn't you say you weren't going?" Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing ignored Su Liang's question, "You were too reckless, not knowing how many people were in that house before taking action."

Su Liang nodded, "Indeed. But under the circumstances, I couldn't think of a better solution."

She had already tested it out. Seeing the old man at the front door, she led people away twice by making noise, sneaked in through the back door, then waited for the person in the backyard to be alone before taking action. But at that time, she didn't know how many people were in the front yard.

In the not-so-big house, there were not many good places to hide, and she couldn't walk on walls and roofs, so going to the front yard was very dangerous. Luring people over and ambushing them from the shadows was the best option at that time.

After all, she had gone there and couldn't return empty-handed. At least she had confidence in escaping. As for climbing walls, her skills were already quite proficient.

"What do you think I should have done then?" Su Liang asked seriously.

"Come back and find me." Ning Jing said.

Su Liang was speechless, "Didn't you say you were tired? Actually, it would be best to find a way to notify Mai Fei, but you asked me to go, isn't that because you wanted me to take action? If I find you again, I might as well not go."

"I can just watch you." Ning Jing said indifferently.

Su Liang understood his meaning.

Ever since she had made up her mind to participate in the Military Exam, Ning Jing had been very dedicated in teaching her martial arts. Whenever she asked Ning Jing for a match, he would put aside whatever he was doing.

This time, when she said "let her fight," it wasn't because Ning Jing was lazy but because she wanted Su Liang to gain experience.

But since Su Liang's strength was not enough, Ning Jing said "watch her" to add an extra layer of protection, just in case.

"Did you say you were tired at the time, waiting for me to beg you to go with me?" Su Liang felt bewildered.

Ning Jing shook her head, "Not to beg, but to invite."

Su Liang: ... Is she really that proud and shy?

"As a matter of fact, it turns out you didn't have to go." Su Liang snorted lightly and went into the room to change clothes.

Ning Jing suddenly reached out to stop her, "Let's do it again."

Su Liang was confused, "What?"

A moment later, Su Liang held a dagger, pressed against the back wall, holding her breath and concentrating.

Ning Jing, who had agreed to recreate the fight they had just had and point out the inadequacy of Su Liang's moves, did not pass through the front yard but fell from the sky to attack Su Liang!

Su Liang was shocked, narrowly dodging Ning Jing's strike!

"If there had been one more person in the house, you would have been injured."

Ning Jing said calmly, her offense still relentless.

Su Liang agreed. She assumed that people in the front yard would follow that path, which was somewhat wishful thinking. If someone didn't come from the ground, but from the air, she couldn't defend against them.

"A sneak attack usually has only one chance, and if you miss or fail, it's useless," Ning Jing said while continuing to strike.

Indeed. If she had been able to take down the first person with a sneak attack, dealing with the second would have been much easier.

Su Liang discovered that although Ning Jing was using a sword, she was using the moves of a knife user, mimicking the strongest person's moves she'd fought earlier, but even more fierce.

"If the older man had been in front, you would have had no chance of winning," Ning Jing said.

Su Liang used her sneak attack on the strongest person. If the old man had been injured by walking in front while the other person went against Su Liang unharmed, things would have turned out very differently.

Dozens of moves had passed, and Su Liang hadn't fallen or been injured, but her clothes had been slashed in over a dozen places.

She knew that Ning Jing was showing mercy, but a ruthless enemy wouldn't. If she were really injured, she wouldn't have the strength to support herself now, and she doubted whether she would be able to escape.

After about thirty minutes of fighting, both of them were soaked in sweat, but compared to Su Liang's disheveled state, Ning Jing looked like she had only been through a rain shower.

With the final move, Ning Jing placed her sword at an awkward angle on Su Liang's neck.

Su Liang felt utterly defeated, and she heard Ning Jing say coldly, "I know you were a soldier in your previous life, skilled in martial arts, quick-witted, intelligent, responsive, but none of that matters in the face of absolute strength."

"That's true," Su Liang sighed.

"Today you managed to return unscathed only by sheer luck. Next time, you may not be so fortunate." Ning Jing said.

Su Liang nodded, "Yes."

"Do you really think I don't have to go?" Ning Jing asked Su Liang with her own words.

Su Liang shook her head, "No."

Actually, she had always been under Ning Jing's protection, but because Ning Jing didn't like to talk, she let Su Liang handle everything she could; her presence was still important.

Su Liang looked at Ning Jing's retreating figure and said, "Master, I was wrong. Next time, I'll definitely invite you."

This was the first time she felt Ning Jing was angry even though she couldn't tell from his expression.

And when Ning Jing said he was tired, waiting for Su Liang to speak up and invite him along, he was testing her.

She wasn't sure about her own martial arts skills as she hadn't met many people since coming to this world. Even if Ning Jing hadn't needed to step in this time, Su Liang should have asked him to come along.

She hadn't lost or been injured, but there was a great deal of luck involved. Su Liang boiled some hot water, and after both of them had bathed and changed clothes, Chang'an came over...

"We caught the head bandit who kidnapped the prisoners last night, and two of his accomplices were killed by a mysterious person. They also confessed to several more accomplices hiding elsewhere."

"The dead prisoners can't even be identified by their remains."

"Half of Bei'an County's prison officers and government soldiers have been bought off, and we haven't finished investigating."

"My Master asked me to inform you both, the head bandit confessed Bei Jingwang Mansion was behind it. The truth is not yet determined, but Ning Jing should make preparations."

Su Liang thanked Mai Fei for the reminder, and as Chang'an was about to leave, he turned back to ask, "What brings you both to the county town? My Master was planning to visit you today!"

Su Liang smiled, "He wanted to eat Osmanthus Cake, but we didn't expect that the county town had a big event, and Mingxiang Building was closed."

Chang'an coughed lightly, "So that's how it is! Well, I won't disturb you anymore, farewell!"

After closing the door, Su Liang went back and asked Ning Jing what he wanted to eat.

Ning Jing glanced at her, "Are you trying to please me?"

Usually, Su Liang cooked without letting Ning Jing order, as she was not a cook.

Su Liang smiled and said obediently, "Yes. Opportunities don't come often."

"You decide." Ning Jing threw the problem of how to please him back at her.

Su Liang began brainstorming, she had to make something delicious that Ning Jing had never tasted before. She had brought some ingredients from the village, otherwise there would be nothing to use.

Originally, Su Liang hadn't planned to call Ning Jing to help with the fire, but he came at the right moment.

‘With my martial arts skills, is there any hope of ranking in the top three in the Military Exam?’ Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing shook his head, “No, if you train your martial arts until next year, the top three should be no problem. But that’s just a means for you to achieve other things, not the purpose of learning martial arts.”

Before today, Ning Jing had always been positive about Su Liang’s martial arts skills.

In fact, today’s biggest problem, according to Ning Jing, was not Su Liang’s weak martial arts skills but her overconfidence and lack of caution.

Su Liang nodded, “I’m relieved then. My ultimate goal of learning martial arts is to defeat you one day. Do you think there is hope?”

Ning Jing paused while adding firewood, “And if you defeat me, what will you

Su Liang chuckled, “Of course, I’ll order and you’ll cook. I want to eat Buddha Jumps Over the Wall.”

Ning Jing was puzzled, “Buddha? Jumping over the wall? What kind of food is that?”

“It’s complicated,” Su Liang said.

Ning Jing nodded, “All right. I want to eat that today. You make it.”

Su Liang: ...

Due to the limitation of ingredients, it was impossible to make it. So, Su Liang, who had spoken offhandedly, now owed Ning Jing a serving of Buddha Jumps Over the Wall...

Unlike the rainy Bei’an County, the capital city was sunny and bright, with crisp autumn air.

Nian Jincheng returned from the military camp, not changing clothes or even drinking water, and went to find Nian Ruxue.

“Miss Qin sent someone to invite the Fourth Young Lady to attend the poetry meeting,” the maid said.

Nian Jincheng frowned. He had been busy with military affairs recently, and every time he had some free time, he wanted to teach Nian Ruxue martial arts skills, but on three consecutive occasions, she had been away from home.

Just as he was about to leave, Nian Jincheng suddenly remembered something and asked the maid, “Is the poetry meeting being held at Qin Mansion?”

“Yes. Today’s poetry meeting is hosted by Miss Qin. She said it’s the first time her cousin, Crown Prince Bei Jingwang, will be attending such an event since arriving in the capital, so she insisted that Fourth Young Lady attend!” the maid answered.

Upon hearing the words “Crown Prince Bei Jingwang,” Nian Jincheng’s eyes narrowed, and he hurried away. After changing clothes, he rode his horse to

Qin Mansion..

[Reward Money]

As one of the top talents among the noble descendants of Qian Country, Nian Jincheng has been highly regarded by the court and his military career has advanced rapidly since he distinguished himself in the Military Exam last year.

However, he would never be seen participating in regular aristocratic recreational activities, such as poetry gatherings and flower appreciation parties.

Since his childhood, he has been very diligent in studying martial arts and literature. Besides his good friend Gu Ling, the young master of the rebel Marquis Chang Xin's family, he has no other friends.

Thus, when a servant from the Qin Mansion reported that the second son of the Nian Family had arrived, the original harmonious poetry gathering fell silent for a moment, with everyone showing surprise.

Dressed elaborately and sitting between Miss Qin and the Sixth Princess, Nian Ruxue stood up with a light smile and said softly, "I made an appointment with my second brother to practice Martial Arts today. I couldn't refuse Miss Qin's invitation, so my second brother must be here to take me back."

Sixth Princess Duanmu Qianqian looked astonished, "Xuexue, your martial arts skills are already very impressive! Are you still going to practice? Do you plan to become a female general?"

Nian Ruxue shook her head quickly, "Sixth Princess, please don't tease me! It's because my second brother always thinks my martial arts skills are weak, and he worries that I will be bullied, so he insists on watching me practice." Envy appeared on the faces of the young ladies present.

Qin Yujun, who organized the poetry gathering today, adjusted the hair on her forehead, pulled Nian Ruxue back to her seat, and said with a smile, "General Nian is a rare guest. How can we let you leave so soon? Xuexue, you must not leave, and we must keep your second brother here as well!"

The Sixth Princess also chimed in.

"My second brother is afraid of being asked to recite poems. I broke our appointment today, so I dare not provoke him further. Please let me go, Yujun. I have to go back." Nian Ruxue insisted on leaving.

Xing Yusheng, who was sitting in a wheelchair across the room, his face pale and weak, spoke faintly, "Cousin, if Miss Nian has something to do, there is no need to force her."

As he spoke, the servant led Nian Jincheng into the garden.

He wore a dark-green brocade robe, his face handsome and resolute, striding confidently with an impressive demeanor, quite different from the young noblemen at the poetry gathering.

Nian Ruxue left her seat to greet him, clinging to Nian Jincheng's arm affectionately and playfully, "Second brother, I'm sorry! I'll go back with you now. "

Qin Yujun gracefully saluted Nian Jincheng, "It's my fault for not knowing that General Nian had an appointment with Xuexue and insisting on inviting her here."

Nian Jincheng shook his head, "It doesn't matter. Since you're here, have a good time, little sister. There's no need to hurry back."

Nian Ruxue was startled, but Nian Jincheng had already pushed her hand away, walked over, and greeted Xing Yusheng with a bow, "I have been wanting to call on the Young Master since I heard that you had arrived in the capital, Xing. I have some free time today. Would you be interested in playing a few games of chess with me?"

Everyone exchanged glances. Was Nian Jincheng here for Xing Yusheng?

Nian Ruxue's uneasiness quickly vanished, and she returned to her seat.

Xing Yusheng was also quite surprised, although he had been observing Nian Jincheng quietly ever since the latter appeared.

Qin Yujun immediately arranged for servants to push Xing Yusheng to the lakeside pavilion and invited Nian Jincheng to join them.

"My cousin, like General Nian, is not interested in reciting poetry but loves playing chess. It's perfect; let them play while we continue our gathering." Qin Yujun laughed.

Nian Jincheng played a move and went straight to the point, "Young Master

Xing, why are you investigating Gu Ling?"

Xing Yusheng's hand holding the chess piece stiffened slightly, yet his expression remained calm, "General Nian, be careful what you say."

Nian Jincheng remained expressionless, "The Emperor has entrusted me with the task of capturing the fugitive Gu Ling. Young Master Xing shouldn't want me to bring your subordinate before the Emperor to explain why Bei Jingwang Mansion is interested in Gu Ling's whereabouts, right?"

Xing Yusheng's face darkened, "Nian Jincheng, are you threatening me?"

"If Young Master Xing doesn't want Bei Jingwang Mansion to be linked to the treasonous Gu Family, please answer my original question. Why are you investigating Gu Ling?" Nian Jincheng pressed the chess piece firmly in front of Xing Yusheng's eyes, his deep voice carrying great pressure.

Xing Yusheng remained silent for a while, then spoke again with a hint of sarcasm, "Before coming to the capital city, I heard that General Nian's only friend was Gu Ling. This kind of deep friendship and relentless pursuit is truly touching! "

Nian Jincheng narrowed his eyes, "If I repeat what you just said to the

Emperor, do you think he will believe that you are defending Gu Ling?"

But Xing Yusheng's face showed a pale smile, "Yes, so what? It's a pity that the person sitting opposite you is not Bei Jingwang, but me – a dying, useless crown prince. I'm flattered by your concern, but your threats are useless against me."

Nian Jincheng snorted coldly. "Are you trying to say that your father doesn't care about you?"

Xing Yusheng's reply seemed irrelevant, "You asked why I investigated Gu Ling; I'm sorry, but I don't even know him. If there is any connection between us, it would be that my grandmother once wanted to marry my younger sister, who used to be Gu Ling's fiancée. Unfortunately, after seeing her today, I can only describe her as an ordinary-looking, hypocritical, and affected woman. It's quite disappointing. I suppose that's how you Nian people are."

Nian Jincheng stared coldly at Xing Yusheng, "Have I offended you, Young Master Xing, upon our first meeting?"

Xing Yusheng lowered his head to play chess, a smile flickering on his face, "I come from the countryside; my health is weak, and I'm neither accomplished in literature nor martial arts. No one pays attention to me. Is it wrong for me to be jealous of your brilliance? I genuinely praise you, there's no need for thanks."

The two of them stopped talking and continued their battle of wits on the chessboard.

At the end of the game, Nian Jincheng lost.

"I'm tired. Ajun, take me back." Xing Yusheng waved for Qi Jun, who was standing outside the pavilion.

Qi Jun ran over and pushed Xing Yusheng away.

Qin Yujun, who had been watching the lakeside pavilion the whole time, let the servant invite Nian Jincheng over. Nian Ruxue stood up again, "My second brother must be ready to leave, and I should go too."

Qin Yujun didn't hold her back this time, but Nian Jincheng passed Nian Ruxue and Qin Yujun with large strides and said, "I still have things to do. Farewell." He simply left.

A young lady who didn't get along with Nian Ruxue sarcastically said, "Xuexue, your second brother didn't come for you? It seems we misunderstood."

"Master, Nian Jincheng has discovered our investigation. What should we do?" Qi Jun asked Xing Yusheng.

Xing Yusheng gazed out of the window, pondering for a moment before responding, "Pull all our men back."

"Yes," Qi Jun nodded, then added with a serious expression, "I don't quite understand, what is his intention?"

"He is testing me and warning me," Xing Yusheng's eyes were deep, "Since he didn't catch our men, there's no need to panic. The real trouble will arise if someone else finds out that I'm investigating Gu Ling."

Qi Jun's face was tense, "Master, are you saying that, on the surface, Nian Jincheng is ruthlessly pursuing Gu Ling, but in fact..."

Xing Yusheng frowned, "Shut up! I haven't said anything, and you don't know anything."

Qi Jun sighed deeply, "My brother should be about to arrive in Bei'an County to find Miss Su."

Mentioning Su Liang, Xing Yusheng's expression softened, and he sighed lightly, "The capital city is truly a disgusting place, far less comfortable than living in Qiuming Manor."

"Did the master notice that both the Sixth Princess and Miss Qin seemed to be interested in Nian Jincheng?" Qi Jun said.

Xing Yusheng's expression was indifferent, "I know. My cousin clearly doesn't like Nian Ruxue, but insists on inviting her, just because of Nian Jincheng." "Doesn't the master mind?" Qi Jun asked weakly.

Xing Yusheng hesitated, "What should I mind? The Sixth Princess was never going to marry me. The emperor called me to the capital city under the pretext of selecting a son-in-law, but it's just a cover. As for my cousin, she's very nice, but she's just my sister."

"So, would the master be willing to have General Nian as his brother-in-law?" Qi Jun smiled.

Xing Yusheng snorted, "Who cares if I'm willing or not? What matters is that my cousin is happy with whoever she marries."

"Ah, it's much more comfortable to deal with Young Master Ning and Miss Su. If Young Master Ning passes the exam, he can come to the capital city to take the test." Qi Jun said.

Xing Yusheng frowned, "Duanmu Chen went to investigate the iron smuggling. Whether it's related to the Xing Family or not depends on what the emperor wants, not the truth. The Bei Jingwang Mansion might be in big trouble lately. I hope it won't affect Ning Jing, otherwise I'll have no face to see Su Liang again."

When Nian Ruxue returned home and went to find Nian Jincheng, he had already returned to the military camp.

In the note that the servant handed to Nian Ruxue, there was only one sentence, "If there's a next time, just give up on the Military Exam."

Bei'an County.

At nightfall, the rain finally stopped.

The storm had subsided, and though it was only on the surface, the common people felt that the trouble had passed.

The news spread that the mastermind behind the iron smuggling was deliberately causing chaos, killing innocent people, and conspiring against the new county magistrate.

As a result, the anger of the common people was directed at the iron smugglers.

But who these people were remained unknown.

Although Chang'an said that the captured thieves confessed to Bei Jingwang's instructions, Mu Fei did not mention Bei Jingwang in the news he disseminated.

Su Liang thought that it probably depended on the emperor's intentions.

No one claimed the bounty in town, but the matter was resolved quickly. The people thought that Mu Fei was very capable, but Mu Fei was filled with doubts.

There was a mysterious expert helping him, but he hadn't even seen a shadow. He suspected Su Liang and Ning Jing because they were the only two acquaintances and suspicious targets, but he couldn't be sure it was them.

Chang'an suggested a fake assassination attempt to test if Su Liang and Ning Jing were skilled in martial arts.

After much deliberation, Mu Fei did not take that approach.

"Both of them have strong personalities and should not be offended. I think the mysterious person is not helping me out of good intentions, but simply punishing evil and removing injustice. Now there are more important matters at hand, and we can't afford to be distracted. Remember, be polite to them." Mu Fei instructed Chang'an.

"Yes. What about the matter of Bei Jingwang Mansion..." Chang'an asked.

Mu Fei looked at him solemnly, "If it was really done by Xing Yan, how could it be discovered so easily? It's so obvious that it seems like someone deliberately framed him. My father has to be cautious when dealing with Xing Yan, and I can't act recklessly. One wrong move and I'll be taken advantage of by him."

"The master's words make sense. I have arranged for someone to escort the three scholars to the provincial city tomorrow. Should I ask Young Master Ning again if he wants to go to Qianshan Academy?" Chang'an asked.

"You can go and ask. If they have cooked something, bring some back for me." Mu Fei rubbed his forehead.

When Chang'an arrived, Su Liang had just finished cooking dinner.

Because she had made a mistake today and angered Ning Jing, she had used the limited ingredients to make a very delicious and fragrant meal.

After Su Liang said Ning Jing was not going to Qianshan Academy, Chang'an hesitated to say that his master hadn't eaten anything all day, and the food cooked by the chefs in the county office didn't suit his taste.

He looked at Ning Jing, "It's your decision."

Unexpectedly, Ning Jing agreed, "Fine. One dish for 500 taels."

Chang'an initially found it strange that Ning Jing suddenly became so agreeable, but when he heard how much it would actually cost, he couldn't believe it...

But since Mu Fei had just expressed his desire to befriend Su Liang and Ning Jing, and since he hadn't eaten anything all day, Chang'an looked at Su Liang's mouth-watering dishes and accepted the "price gouging" on behalf of his master, "Deal! The food will be ruined if it gets cold, so I'll take it back to the master first and then bring the money back to you."

Ning Jing nodded his agreement, then let Su Liang take one-third of each dish...

Chang'an looked at the small portion of food and couldn't help but ask, "This is worth 500 taels?"

Su Liang counter-questioned, "Are you backing out?"

Chang'an said with a drooping face, "No." After having come so far in this situation, Mu Fei would surely blame him for losing face if he refused...

So, Chang'an returned with a large food container, placed it in front of Mu Fei, and said it cost him three thousand taels.

Mu Fei looked at the small portions of food that looked like leftovers from someone else's meal, and said with a black face, "This money, you pay for it yourself! "

Chang'an: .

However, after Chang'an explained that this wasn't leftover food, but Su Liang's freshly cooked meal, Mu Fei started eating. While eating, he nodded his head and praised Su Liang's cooking skills as excellent, and finally ate everything.

Not having eaten a bite and losing three thousand taels, Chang'an had to go back to Su Liang to deliver the money.

After receiving the money, Su Liang happily said to Ning Jing, "That's more like it.. We came to the city to earn the bounty; we can't leave empty-handed!"

Chapter 50: Hit you, hunting

[Hit you, Hunt]

The next day, Chang'an, following orders, went to buy vegetables from Su Liang again, but found the door locked.

He remembered that yesterday, Su Liang had said she went into town because Ning Jing wanted Osmanthus Cake, so he went to the Mingxiang Building.

Ning Jing and Su Liang were not there. The manager told him they had been there half an hour before and had bought two boxes of Osmanthus Cakes and then hastily left in the direction of the city gate.

Upon hearing this news, Mai Fei could only give up. He was concentrating on the investigation and couldn't afford to be distracted.

Upon returning to the village, Su Liang's life was still busy but fulfilling.

She concentrated on martial arts training and studied during rest times. She took care of the three meals a day, and Ning Jing was responsible for cleaning and tidying.

With the weather turning colder, villagers coming to Su Liang for medical treatment never stopped. She kept an account book for those who couldn't afford to pay, allowing them to owe her the fee.

Some people secretly took Su Liang's medicinal materials to the town pharmacy and ask for the price, and they found that the price in town was even higher.

It wasn't that Su Liang was conducting a loss-making business, but because she bought in large quantities, it was cheaper.

Sometimes a patient's family would give Su Liang some eggs, vegetables, or meat to show their gratitude.

Su Liang doesn't refuse any food gifts, but she always calculates it as part of the medical fee. These were all items that she and Ning Jing had to buy with their own money.

After the medicine cabinet was built, Ning Jing bought some more timber and transported it back home. He spent a large amount of time every day, busy in the Firewood Room, not knowing what he was up to.

One day, it was time for him to train with Su Liang again, and he called her over to the Firewood Room.

Su Liang had not been in the Firewood Room for a long time since chopping and burning firewood were usually Ning Jing's tasks.

To her surprise, when she entered this time, the room was spotlessly clean and divided into two areas.

One half was neatly stacked with firewood, and the other half was filled with timber and tools, and there was a small stool for Ning Jing to sit on.

What Ning Jing wanted Su Liang to view was his recent accomplishment, a wooden weapon rack filled with various weapons.

There weren't eighteen different types, but Su Liang counted, and there were ten different types, all made of wood, and meticulously crafted. She picked up a long whip and asked Ning Jing what it was made of.

"Animal skin and tendons, bought from the town," Ning Jing responded.

"Your woodworking skills have already become very impressive." Su Liang complimented while swinging the whip, "Are these all for me?"

Ning Jing took the whip away from her, "They're not for you, they're to hit you."

Su Liang:

Moments later, Su Liang, holding the long sword, was forced to retreat repeatedly under Ning Jing's whip. Eventually, she backed into a corner, and helplessly said, "It looks like you're trying to whip me into two pieces."

Actually, Ning Jing's expression was quite normal, but the whip in his hands was indeed frightening.

But Su Liang was not afraid. It was the first time she had encountered such a weapon, and she had not found a good way to counterattack, so she could only defend.

Ning Jing swung the whip out and wrapped it around Su Liang's arm, pulling her out from the corner, "In the martial arts competition arena, your opponent could possibly use any weapon."

In a real fight, if there is an opportunity to use a weapon, no one would choose to fight with bare hands. Weapons are also a part of one's strength.

Su Liang's expression became serious, "Let's go again!"

Ning Jing wanted Su Liang to familiarize herself with different types of weapons. She doesn't have to be proficient at using the whip herself but needs to learn how to deal with an enemy who uses a whip.

In fact, the reason Su Liang had to retreat at the start was because her opponent was Ning Jing. The starting point he set for her was too high, far surpassing a normal martial artist using a whip.

Bai Xiaohu and Zhuzi peeked through the door crack, only to see Ning Jing whipping Su Liang. The two little fellows were frightened and hastily knocked on the door, shouting, "Big Brother Ning, don't hit Sister Su Liang!"

After Su Liang let the younger boys in, Bai Xiaohu and Zhuzi made sure that she had not been injured before they exhaled in relief.

brought them snacks, heard Bai Xiaohu ask when they were going to hunt wild boars, and said tentatively that it would be tomorrow, weather permitting.

After sending the two kids away, Su Liang took a sip of water, and then carried on "searching for trouble".

Throughout the day, Ning Jing controlled himself extremely well, and didn't actually hit Su Liang. But Su Liang herself calculated that if Ning Jing were her enemy, she would have been whipped countless times, and would have died multiple times...

After dinner, Ning Jing presented Su Liang with a training schedule.

Three days were allocated for each weapon. Su Liang would control the intensity of her other daily training sessions herself.

"That sounds good." Su Liang said, "If the weather's bad or if we need to go out, we'll postpone it. Once one round of training is over, it'll be time to head to the Provincial City. Practising martial arts in other places won't be so convenient then. "

"Buy a mansion," Ning Jing suggested.

Su Liang's eyes lit up, "That's a good idea. As for the weapons, after you've tried them out on me, I will need to return the favor. You'll have to teach me how to use them."

Ning Jing nodded in agreement.

"If the weather's good tomorrow, will you join us to hunt wild boars in the mountains?" Su Liang asked him.

This was something she had previously promised Bai Xiaohu, although she hadn't actually gone to the mountains yet.

"What do you think?" Ning Jing responded with a question of his own. Su Liang understood immediately, "Please, you must come."

"Hmm," Ning Jing nodded in agreement.

The next day, as predicted, was beautiful and clear, and Bai Xiaohu excitedly came over early to confirm that Su Liang was really going to the mountains, before going back to inform Old Lady Bai.

Old Lady Bai was pleased to see her two grandsons becoming closer with Ning Jing and Su Liang, but knew that there were wild beasts in the mountains at this time of year. How could she be at ease allowing Bai Xiaohu to go there?

Old Man Bai made the decision and ordered Bai Peng and Bai He to go and guide Su Liang and Ning Jing and assist them. Bai Xiaohu would follow, as long as he didn't wander off.

Predicting that they wouldn't be back by noon, Su Liang prepared some meat buns to take with them.

She put on old clothes, tied her hair up, tucked her pant legs in, carried a basket on her back, and held a sickle in her hand.

Ning Jing went to the Firewood Room and got out a set of bow and arrows that he had previously half-finished and only completed the night before. He had bought the arrowheads and bowstring from the county town.

"Some wild boars came down from the mountains and injured people in Liu Family Village a few days ago, they weren't captured. We'll head west," Bai He pointed out a direction.

Bai Xiaohu blurted out impulsively, "Uncle, have you been secretly going to Liu Family Village again?"

The color drained from Bai He's face. When Bai Peng glimpsed this look on his brother's face, what more needed to be said? He didn't care that Su Liang and Ning Jing had heard it, he sighed and asked Bai He, "What are you planning exactly?"

Bai He shrugged off a dried branch in the path and made a bitter smile, "Huilan's parents are arranging a marriage proposal for her. The suitor is a butcher in town who killed his wife. She doesn't want to marry him and has said if her brother and sister-in-law push her into it, she'll hang herself." Bai Peng frowned, "Have you met her privately?"

"Mother's marriage proposal for you..." Bai Peng asked again.

Bai He's face darkened, "She's lazy and has a bad temper; I don't want her!"

Bai Peng sighed, "Mom also had someone ask around. Although the dowry is not small, the girl's character is not good, just forget about it. If you are determined about Liu Huilan, I'll help you persuade Dad and Mom when we get back."

"Really?" Bai He looked thrilled, "Big brother, you can't lie to me!" "Why would I lie to you?" Bai Peng glared at Bai He.

Ning Jing and Su Liang, walking at the back, listened to the conversation between the two brothers while taking in the scenery. They didn't express any opinion.

Su Liang felt that if Bai Peng took the initiative to speak out, their parents may loosen up a bit. Being the eldest he was the pillar of the family, and of course his words carried weight. Besides, Bai

He was determined. If they forced him to marry someone he didn't like, how would the family stay harmonious in the future?

As they headed deeper into the mountains, the Bai brothers led the way and Little Tiger bounced around behind them. Meanwhile, Ning Jing was picking up leaves and Su Liang was collecting mushrooms.

Bai Xiaohu ran back and asked, "Sister Su Liang, can we eat these mushrooms? My grandpa says a lot of mushrooms are poisonous!"

"I recognize this one, it is edible. But don't just randomly pick mushrooms, okay?" Su Liang cautioned Bai Xiaohu.

Bai Xiaohu ran over to Ning Jing to see the leaves he was collecting and asked what he was going to do with them.

"Play." Ning Jing answered with a single word.

Bai Xiaohu scratched his head, genuinely not understanding what was so fun about this, before running forward again.

The Bai brothers suddenly stopped, turning back to gesture for silence.

Following the direction of Bai Peng's finger, Su Liang spotted a gray wild rabbit.

Quietly, Ning Jing handed her the bow and arrow. Su Liang found her position, aimed, and fired, hitting the rabbit the moment it darted away.

The Bai family, two adults and a child, were stunned speechless.

"Sister Su Liang is so amazing!" Little Tiger clapped his hands in admiration.

Su Liang explained, archery was her hobby in her past life, she might be a bit rusty, but the basic skills were still there.

The rabbit was fat, hefty in her grip, and Su Liang had already thought of how she was going to cook it.

Bai Peng carried the rabbit on his back, and they continued to walk west.

During a water break, Bai He spotted some wild pig tracks nearby.

After Bai Xiaohu finished chewing a meat bun, he was sent up a tall tree and instructed not to come down.

The Bai brothers followed the pig tracks with their spears. Upon hearing a noise, they quickly signaled to Su Liang and Ning Jing to be careful.

Su Liang spotted the pig. It was large and looked tough to handle.

She chose a tree to climb. When she looked for Ning Jing, she found that he had disappeared.

The Bai brothers approached quietly, one in front and one behind.

Unfortunately, Bai He's spear missed its mark, and so did Bai Peng's.

The provoked boar charged at Bai He.

Bai He sprinted towards the tree where Su Liang was, the wild boar close behind him.

Just as the boar was about to get him, a large stone fell from the sky, hitting the boar square on the head!

Bai He didn't dare to look back, he kept running!

The boar, however, wasn't knocked out. It charged again. As it neared the tree,

Su Liang focused her gaze, drew her arrow, and shot it through the boar's head! Propelled by inertia, the boar crashed into the tree and fell to the ground with a thud!

Bai He, still in shock, saw Ning Jing step out from behind another tree, his clothes unruffled and his demeanor calm.

The stone that slowed the boar down had evidently fallen from that tree. But no one saw when Ning Jing climbed up, or how he descended.

"You two are pretty good! Have you hunted before?" Bai Peng asked.

Su Liang shook her head, "I'm not sure, I've forgotten. And I don't know about him."

Bai Xiaohu ran over, jubilantly running circles around the boar, "I saw it, Xiao

Shu was being chased, and Sister Su Liang shot it!"

Bai He laughed awkwardly, "This big guy is too scary."

The group promptly finished off the food they'd brought with them.

The Bai brothers cut some branches, tied the boar to them with ropes and dragged it down the hill.

Along the way, Su Liang shot two wild chickens, found a few chicken eggs, and picked quite a few mushrooms.

Ning Jing was essentially there for a leisurely outing, trailing behind collecting leaves.

After descending the mountain, the Bai brothers took the boar to town to sell, agreeing to split the profits.

Initially, Su Liang had promised Bai Xiaohu a meat feast after they caught the wild boar, but they had just slaughtered a pig a few days ago. Bai Xiaohu was sensible enough to suggest selling it to save money for his uncle's future bride.

Su Liang kept a rabbit and a chicken, Bai Xiaohu took a chicken home, excitedly telling his family about Su Liang's incredible archery skills.

As twilight fell, the small courtyard filled with the aroma of stewed chicken with mushrooms.

A carriage crossed the bridge, the sound of horse hooves echoed from behind.

The carriage driver, Chang'an, turned to see a man on horseback approaching.

By the time the carriage stopped outside Su Liang's house, the man riding a horse had already arrived nearby.

It was Qi Yan, whom Xing Yusheng had previously sent to the capital to gather information, and now he had returned to deliver a letter to Su Liang. He also had two boxes on the horse with him.

Chang'an stepped off the carriage and asked about Qi Yan's identity.

Qi Yan replied with a stern face by asking about the identities of Chang'an and Mai Fei.

Su Liang came to the door upon hearing the noise, first saw Chang'an without any surprise, then turned her head and saw Qi Yan, she smiled and said, "Come in quickly."

Qi Yan led his horse into the courtyard, Mai Fei, who had already descended from the carriage, felt inexplicably annoyed and asked Su Liang who that was. Su Liang didn't respond, but asked, "What can I do for you, Master Mai?"

Mai Fei felt unwelcome, but as he had already come, there was no reason not to enter. He told her frankly that he had come here to eat.

Su Liang declined politely, "I thought Master Mai was busy with official duties."

"No matter how busy I am, I can't starve myself. Moreover, I have something important to discuss with you," Mai Fei said.

"Well then, please come in." Only then did Su Liang relent.

Luckily there was a set of table and chairs that Xing Yusheng had sent previously, otherwise there wouldn't be enough places for everyone to sit.

When the dishes were served, a smile just emerged on Mai Fei's face when Ning Jing said, "This meal costs 5,000 taels."

Mai Fei's face stiffened, "What about him?" He was referring to Qi Yan.

Qi Yan, unaware that Mai Fei was the fourth prince, snorted, "My master is a good friend of Miss Su."

Mai Fei's eyes flashed slightly, "Are you the subordinate of Crown Prince Bei Jingwang?"

"What if I am?" Qi Yan retorted.

Mai Fei listened to Qi Yan only mentioning that Su Liang was a good friend of Xing Yusheng, not mentioning Ning Jing, which further confirmed that Su Liang's words were true.

"Miss Su, I thought we were friends too," Mai Fei ignored Ning Jing's steep charge and looked at Su Liang.

Su Liang put down the last plate of food, "Ning Jing makes the decision."

"Is this wild chicken and rabbit caught by Miss Su today? That's impressive! What a treat! Once I return to the capital, my master and Ajun will surely envy me!" Qi Yan laughed heartily.

Mai Fei's tone was gloomy, "Su Liang, why don't you just tell me how much it costs to be a friend who can come for meals at any time? I'll pay it all at once." To avoid being fleeced daily.

Su Liang chuckled, "Friends don't charge for meals. Master Mai, if you come again, the price won't increase, it's still 5,000 taels each time."

Chang'an felt that his master had a somewhat masochistic tendency. If this were in the capital, anyone who showed him disrespect like this would have been cut down. But here in this small town, he was at the mercy of Su Liang.

After everyone had taken their seats, Su Liang called in Chang'an.

Seeing a pair of chopsticks and a bowl still on the table, Chang'an quickly said he wasn't hungry.

"Guests are always welcome. We won't charge you." Su Liang said.

Chang'an felt his master's face grew even darker...

Mai Fei, who had spent 5,000 taels, didn't get to eat the chicken leg he wanted.

Because one chicken leg belonged to Ning Jing and the other belonged to Su Liang, and Su Liang sent hers to Qi Yan who had traveled far. As for the rabbit leg, Su Liang cut it off and planned to cook it the next day.

After dinner, seeing Mai Fei not leaving, making it inconvenient for Qi Yan to speak, he decided to ride back to Qiuming Manor to stay, promising to come back the next morning.

The two boxes were medical books that Lady Xing had sent to Su Liang, all of which were left behind.

What puzzled Qi Yan was, when he left last time, Su Liang and Ning Jing were still married. Now when he came back, they had become sworn siblings. He needed to hurry and inform his master of this news.

"Is this tea also a gift from Xing Yusheng?" Mai Fei asked, holding a top-quality porcelain teacup in his hand.

"It's getting late, Master Mai. If you have anything to say, just say it." Su Liang said, indicating that it was time for him to leave. She was very busy and didn't want to have to deal with him.

Mai Fei put down his teacup and snorted, "You are really not afraid of offending me."

"If Master Mai is so easily offended, then there's no need for us to associate in the future." Su Liang said.

Hearing the implication in Su Liang's words, Mai Fei got serious, "Very well, let's get down to business. I have a favor to ask.."