

Three-Time 71

Chapter 71: 071. Leave Early

The night deepened, and Su Liang brought hot water into Yan Shiba's room.

This place was usually for receiving patients, with a simple screen handmade by Ning Jing. There was a table and chair outside and a bed inside.

As she went past the screen, she saw Yan Shiba lying in bed with her eyes open, quiet, wooden, and lifeless.

At the sight of Su Liang, she seemed to have pressed a button and suddenly came to life, her voice soft and tender, "Sister Liang."

Su Liang frowned, "If you don't want to talk, you don't have to, there's no need to be so exaggerated."

Yan Shiba's eyes flickered, and her smile grew even warmer, "What kind of style does Sister Liang like? Tell me, I can do it all."

Su Liang shook her head, "Since you're not an assassin for now, just rest."

Yan Shiba's eyes gradually deepened, "You saved me for the first time because we had a common enemy, and it was to your advantage if I killed Yan Sui. What are you after this time?"

Upon hearing this, Su Liang twisted the cloth in her hand and thought for a moment before saying, "Although we had conflicts in the past, we don't bear any grudges. You killed my friend Yang Yu's older brother, but his death wasn't a bad thing. I'm a doctor, and when a wounded person comes to my door, if there's no enmity between us, I'll naturally save them, and I'll also charge for it."

Yan Shiba sneered, "Doctor? You save anyone so long as they don't have a grudge against you? If it's someone with a heinous criminal record who just hasn't offended you, will you save them too?"

Su Liang nodded calmly, "I can save them. I'm accumulating Medical Skills experience. First, I'll heal the person, then determine if they are a villain, then try the many different ways of death I've imagined, to carry out justice on behalf of heaven. It's a win-win situation, isn't it?"

Yan Shiba never expected Su Liang's answer to be so strange, her face stiffened and her eyes became defensive, "Could it be that you plan to do that to me?"

Su Liang sneered, "Figured it out? It's too late. You've walked into your own trap. If you can, try and run."

Yan Shiba had a ghostly expression, "You... I really got the wrong idea about you! But have you forgotten, I still have hidden weapons! Today, it's your time to die!"

"I'm so scared!" Su Liang said as she slapped the open hot cloth onto Yan Shiba's face, wiping it haphazardly and complaining, "So dirty."

"Sister Liang, you're no fun. Why don't you continue playing? I was waiting for that Ning fellow with the pretty face to come rushing in to save you, so I could give him a

needle!" Yan Shiba's tone was casual, but beneath the covered blanket, her left hand gripping the concealed weapon loosened abruptly.

Su Liang was washing the cloth, and Yan Shiba cast affectionate glances at her, "Sister Liang, to think I'm not even worth being called a heinous criminal in your heart, I feel so unaccomplished!"

Su Liang looked indifferent, "You were just a tool before. Do you think being an assassin is because you were born a killer?"

Yan Shiba fell silent for a moment, then sighed, "I became an assassin because my father was an assassin, I was born among assassins, and everyone around me taught me to be one. But I don't think there's anything wrong with that." "That's because you don't know what's good," Su Liang said.

Yan Shiba suddenly laughed, "Sister Liang, you're not trying to save me, are you? You aren't that bored, are you? Do you really think you're the reincarnation of a Bodhisattva?"

Su Liang stopped her work, frowning at Yan Shiba, "Are you sick? If you weren't seriously injured and couldn't leave, do you think I would let you stay? You call me sister so casually, giving me a random name, do you really think of yourself as my sister? You're not that naive, are you? I heal you, you pay me, and you leave. It's that simple. If you don't like it, go away now!"

In the next room, Ning Jing heard Su Liang's last word, and the faint curve of his lips vanished in a flash.

"How much do you want?" Yan Shiba asked as she looked at Su Liang. Su Liang snorted, "All of it. Whatever you have, that's what I want." "So greedy?" Yan Shiba's face turned scornful.

Su Liang didn't even look at her, "Isn't that what you want? Any good intentions, and you think there's an ulterior motive. You think you don't deserve to be treated genuinely by others, so why bother getting close to me in such a contrived manner? If I treat you well and you can't stand it, thinking I have another purpose, I'll demand all of your possessions. If you don't agree to give them, I'll throw you out now. Will that satisfy you?"

"I! DON'T! AGREE! Throw me out!" Yan Shiba looked at Su Liang as the words escaped her mouth.

Su Liang threw the cloth back into the basin, picked up Yan Shiba, and walked out, "Ning Jing, open the door to send off our guest!"

Ning Jing's door opened at the sound, and he walked straight to it, pulling the bolt open.

Su Liang carried Yan Shiba out without dropping her and leaned down to set her down outside the door.

Dark clouds covered the moon, and the chill was intense.

Yan Shiba's cold eyes stared at Su Liang, a hint of mockery on her face, "Aren't you a doctor? Is this how you treat your patients?"

"I am a doctor, but I don't treat people who don't know good from bad. You think I can't truly have good intentions towards you? If this is what you want, I'll grant it." Su Liang said, closing the door and bolting it from inside.

"Go back to sleep, and don't worry about it," Su Liang said to Ning Jing. "If she wants to gamble with her life, I'll accompany her."

Through the closed door, Yan Shiba heard Su Liang's words clearly, and her face darkened instantly.

The cold wind blew, and she shivered, sitting against the wall with her eyes closed, whispering inaudibly, "You have no reason to be this good to me... it must be fake..."

Unknown time had passed, and Yan Shiba felt colder and colder, her consciousness gradually blurring, and just before losing consciousness, she mumbled, "Bastard... really not taking care of me..."

It was late at night.

Su Liang was still reading when she heard a knock on her door.

"She'll freeze to death," Ning Jing said.

Su Liang was slightly annoyed, "If I bring her back, she won't think I have a kind heart, she'll think I'm trying to use her for something. She doesn't trust anyone because of her past experiences. Do I have to coax her and beg her? I don't have that much spare time, and I'm not that saintly."

"When you sent her out just now, her forehead was dark. She might not survive the night. If you can accept collecting her corpse tomorrow, suit yourself." Ning Jing finished before returning to his room.

Su Liang closed the book and walked outside emotionlessly.

Yan Shiba, outside the front door, was curled up in the cold wind, nearly freezing stiff.

Su Liang brought her back, moved the charcoal basin to the bedside, brought hot water to warm her hands, and only relaxed when her face regained color. After a while, Yan Shiba's face grew even redder.

Feeling her forehead, she found that she had a fever.

"What a way to bring trouble upon yourself." Su Liang called Ning Jing to bring her some alcohol and had him prepare the medicine.

"Once she's better, kick her out immediately and give her a paper that says 'cutting ties, whoever goes back on it is a dog!'" Su Liang said irritably, "I'll write it later!"

After working through the night, when Yan Shiba's fever finally subsided, the sky was almost bright.

Su Liang gave her medicine that made her fall into a deep sleep and didn't wake up for a while.

Ning Jing fetched wooden boards and ropes for Su Liang, who then used them to secure Yan Shiba's injured arm and leg.

After breakfast, Su Liang went to ask Bai Xiaohu's grandmother if she could take care of Yan Shiba until they returned from the provincial city.

Since it was winter and there wasn't much agricultural work to be done, Bai Xiaohu's grandmother gladly agreed, assuring Su Liang that she could go with Ning Jing without worry and that she would take good care of Yan Shiba.

"Didn't you say you were leaving on the eighth day?" Bai Xiaohu's grandmother asked, knowing they still had a few days left.

Su Liang smiled, "We plan to hit the road ahead of schedule to avoid rushing along the way. Today, I'll make the medicine for her. If it's ready, we'll leave today, otherwise tomorrow. Before we leave, I'll ask you to come over. Please take care of things at home then."

"You should start early, spend some time settling in the city, and not let any discomfort affect Ning Jing's exam," Bai Xiaohu's grandmother said.

Su Liang handed Bai Xiaohu's grandmother a 100-liang silver note, telling her not to give Yan Shiba any special treatment. She instructed her to serve Yan Shiba whatever Bai Family ate, and if Yan Shiba didn't eat, just let her go hungry.

The 100-liang note was to guarantee that Yan Shiba ate meat every day. However, it was important that everyone ate the same food, and Yan Shiba shouldn't know that Su Liang had given the money.

"She's weird and has been spoiled. Please don't indulge her," Su Liang said.

Bai Xiaohu's grandmother was slightly confused, "Isn't she your sister? Are you two...?" She couldn't figure out if they were on good terms or not.

Su Liang sighed, "She's been spoiled outside and needs some tough love. In any case, just listen to me. You're just here to help, and if she dares to say anything offensive, scold her! Don't hold back."

After Bai Xiaohu's grandmother took the money and went home, she mulled it over and concluded that Su Liang must be right, so the problem must be with Yan Shiba!

Of course, she wouldn't scold Yan Shiba, but she certainly wouldn't treat her like before, when she had actively taken care of Yan Shiba, fed her, and listened to her orders, after hearing that she was Su Liang's sister.

Ning Jing went to the county town and bought some more medicinal herbs.

After locking the door, Su Liang busied herself for half a day, preparing medicinal ointment and oral medicine for Yan Shiba's wounds. She packed them in small pouches, making them easy to use when needed.

Su Liang showed Bai Xiaohu's grandmother how to use the ointment, reminded her of the schedule, and briefed her on things to note while boiling the medicine.

When Ning Jing passed through the town, he was seen by Hu Er's follower. When he returned from the county town, Hu Er was waiting for him.

The custom-made carriage that Su Liang had ordered was finished, and Ning Jing took it to head back. They had also asked Hu Er for help in requesting a wheeled chair. Once it was done, it would be sent directly to Su Village.

Hu Er readily agreed, saying it wouldn't be a problem.

They had already planned the trip, but after what happened with Yan Shiba the night before, Su Liang decided to leave early, and Ning Jing had no objections.

Su Liang, as a Doctor, saved Yan Shiba at last, but she no longer wanted anything to do with her. Yan Shiba's sad past might have caused her psychological issues, craving affection yet refusing to trust anyone.

When Yan Shiba was eager to find Su Liang, Su Liang thought they could be friends and be kind to Yan Shiba, but instead, she grew suspicious of her intentions.

Su Liang didn't owe Yan Shiba anything. Even if she had the time, there was no way she could indulge her.

After everything was taken care of, Su Liang and Ning Jing finished packing their belongings and prepared to leave.

Bai Xiaohu's grandmother brought her two grandchildren to see them off and told them to be careful on the road.

"Sister Su Liang, will you come back?" Bai Xiaohu asked, feeling a bit down because his grandfather had told him that once Ning Jing became a scholar, they might not return.

Su Liang smiled and ruffled Bai Xiaohu's hair, "We will come back for the New Year."

"Really?" Bai Xiaohu's eyes lit up immediately.

Zhuzi squeezed forward, "Sister Su Liang, you should pat my head too."

Unable to hold back a chuckle, Su Liang patted Zhuzi's head, "You've grown taller, make sure to exercise well. I'll bring you gifts when I come back.

The two boys immediately let go of Su Liang and ran to hug Ning Jing's legs, both exclaiming:

"Brother Ning, you must protect Sister Su Liang!"

"Brother Ning, I'll miss Sister Su Liang, and you have to bring her back soon!"

Ning Jing nodded gently, "Alright."

Su Liang took out an envelope and handed it to Bai Xiaohu's grandmother,

"This is a letter for Ajiu. When she wakes up, give it to her."

Bai Xiaohu's grandmother hurriedly took it, "The sun is setting, you better go now! Don't worry about home, I'll take good care of Miss Ajiu."

Ning Jing drove the carriage, with Su Liang sitting inside. The carriage slowly crossed the bridge and headed towards the village entrance.

Su Bai heard they were leaving and caught up with them. He first asked if they would return, then told Ning Jing to take good care of Su Liang, reminding them to be careful when they were outside.

After watching the carriage leave, Bai Xiaohu's grandmother took the letter back to Su Liang's house and entered Yan Shiba's room.

Seeing that she was still asleep, she left the letter on the bedside, looked at the ointment and packaged medicine on the table, and muttered to herself to remember Su Liang's instructions. After reviewing the details, she closed the door and left.

As soon as Bai Xiaohu's grandmother left, Yan Shiba opened her eyes.

"You said some harsh words, but you still cared in the end," Yan Shiba scoffed.

"You arranged everything so well, but don't assume I'm some grateful person."

She tilted her head, saw the letter by her pillow, picked it up, bit one end with her teeth, and tore it open with one hand, revealing a thin sheet of paper inside.

Unfolding the paper, she fixed her gaze at the top line, which read, "Once you can walk again."

Yan Shiba frowned as she looked at the empty space in the middle, then glanced at the bottom line, which read, "Get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost, get lost..."

There were a total of eighteen "get lost" phrases.

Yan Shiba stared at these words, first coldly snorting, "This is a trick to capture through releasing."

After a short silence, she lost her composure and roared, "Ahhhhhhh! Damn it, girl, come back to me!"

Chapter 72: 072. Beautiful Monk

After a day of arranging for Yan Shiba and preparing for their journey, they were busy until the sun was about to set by the time their carriage arrived at Feiyan Town.

Last night, Su Liang scarcely closed her eyes, and she was drowsy in the carriage when she suddenly heard an angry shout, "You bald thief! How dare you steal money! Someone, catch this thief!"

She opened her eyes and lifted the curtain to look outside.

Ahead there was a commotion, and a shiny bald head stood out in the crowd.

A monk wearing ordinary clothes had his back to Su Liang, so she couldn't see his face.

"A monk stealing? Must be a fake monk!"

"Look at his smooth-skinned face, I bet he's a Casanova!"

"Report it to the authorities!"

Originally, it had nothing to do with Ning Jing and Su Liang, but the spectacle of a "monk stealing money on the street" attracted many onlookers, who blocked the road with their noisy clamor.

They had just changed their carriage that day, and they couldn't get through for the time being.

Su Liang thought they might as well wait for the crowd to disperse before proceeding, but then she saw the monk being pushed around and turning to face her. The sight of his appearance made her pause for a moment.

The description of “fine and fresh” was not an exaggeration.

About eighteen or nineteen years old, thin and fair-skinned, with delicate features that could be called beautiful even with his bald head and coarse monk’s robe. He didn’t defend himself when people humiliated and reviled him, but merely put his hands together and chanted a low prayer.

The scene was quite dramatic.

The devout Little Monk seemed to be separated from the boisterous crowd around him, as if they were in two different worlds.

However, Su Liang didn’t know the details of the incident, whether the theft was true or not, and she had no intention of intervening.

Just as she was about to lower the curtain, she heard Ning Jing speak, “He has a dark foreboding in his countenance.”

Su Liang: ...

There was no need to ask “how do you know the monk isn’t a murderer” kind of questions, because it was impossible to determine at the moment.

And Su Liang had officially promised to “do things” for Ning Jing.

The trigger for their tasks was the ominous “dark foreboding” Ning Jing mentioned.

The chanting monk was pushed to the ground by the big man, and many people crowded in to trample him.

However, he didn’t resist or flee, so it was possible that he would be beaten to death on the spot.

After all, the law didn’t hold the mob accountable. That big man might have done this deliberately, rousing public outrage and prompting everyone to join in the assault, so if the monk died, he could evade responsibility.

Su Liang jumped down from the carriage, made her way through the crowd, and shouted, “Stop!”

No one listened.

With a resigned expression, she drew a knife, quickly moved to the big man holding the monk, and pressed the weapon to his neck. “Everyone stop!” she shouted.

Many people hadn’t seen how Su Liang had appeared, as if she had dropped from the sky.

After a moment of quiet, someone accused Su Liang, “What are you doing? This fake monk is stealing money! Are you his accomplice? Or do you find him attractive and want to be with him?”

Laughter erupted at this remark.

As Su Liang looked over, she saw that the speaker was an ugly man with a large mole on his face. It was difficult not to suspect that his so-called “righteousness” was born out of jealousy for the monk’s beauty.

The monk's face had been stomped on, and his clothing was torn.

He slowly stood up, looked at Su Liang with calm eyes, and put his hands together, murmuring, "Amitābha Buddha..."

Before the monk could say anything else, Su Liang coldly asked the big man,

"What evidence do you have that he stole money?"

The young woman hiding in the corner saw everyone looking at her and said meekly, "I was buying steamed buns when the monk stole my money." The monk sighed at this.

"Where's the bun vendor? Did he see anything?" Su Liang asked.

A man was pushed out of the crowd, but he quickly waved his hands, saying he hadn't seen anything.

"Did you steal her money?" Su Liang asked the monk.

Without answering, the monk lowered his eyes and resumed his chanting.

"You're blocking my way. Everyone leave now. If the monk stole money, report him to the authorities," Su Liang said coldly.

For the sake of the knife, the big man nodded hurriedly, "I'm going to take him to the county government right now!"

Su Liang put away her knife and said coldly, "The new County Magistrate, Magistrate Mu, is brilliant and impartial. He won't let any evildoer go unpunished, nor will he be swayed by anyone's one-sided story, framing the innocent!"

Su Liang's last sentence was directed at the woman, who shrank back and pleaded while clutching the big man's arm, "My lord, it's only three pennies, let it go."

However, the big man's brows furrowed, "No! Is three pennies not money?"

"Go. To the county government," Su Liang demanded, sensing something was amiss with the woman's behavior and suspecting that she might be lying. The woman became flustered and clung tightly to the big man, "No...we can't

Stealing three coins would not amount to much punishment in the government office, just a few hits with a plank and a few days behind bars.

However, the punishment for false accusation in Qian Country's law was much more severe.

The burly man finally sensed something was off and stared at the woman, "Did he steal it or not?"

The woman sobbed, "I was buying steamed buns and saw him asking for alms, so I gave him one... My mother-in-law said one bun was missing, and I was afraid my husband would beat me..."

Only now did the bun seller dare to tell the truth, "The little monk came to me for alms! I drove him away, but the young lady kindly gave him a bun she bought. Who would have thought that after a while, she came back with others, falsely accusing the little monk of stealing her money!"

"I didn't do it on purpose, I just wanted to help him..." The woman sat on the ground, her face full of tears.

The situation turned around.

Those who had just cursed the monk immediately switched targets and began pointing fingers at the couple.

With his eyes wide like copper bells, the man yanked the woman up, and slapped her hard, "I knew it! You never behave yourself, seeing he's good-looking, you think you can seduce him, right? You think I don't know you've been sneaking peeks at the pretty boy next door?"

"Benefactor, do not blame this woman; it's all this humble monk's fault." The monk finally said something other than "Amitabha" to defend the woman.

"So, what have you two been doing behind my back?" The man's anger was even stronger.

"Stop adding fuel to the fire, let's go!" Su Liang looked at the monk coldly.

Indeed, the monk was beautiful, and the woman probably had a moment of weakness in wanting to be a good person and giving him a bun, thinking she could get away with it at home.

Her actions after that, though, could perhaps be explained by weakness, but the outcome was malicious. As soon as she was in trouble, she pushed an innocent person to take the blame. She knew her husband had a violent temper and was heavy-handed. Yet she didn't make a sound when the monk was

beaten up.

Pitiable and hateful.

The monk sighed and followed Su Liang out of the crowd.

The man dragged the woman away as well.

Order was restored on the street, and Su Liang went to the carriage side. Seeing Ning Jing nod, she knew that the monk was no longer in danger, so she turned to him, "No need to thank me, you can go now."

The monk put his hands together, "Benefactor, what you did earlier would harm that woman benefactor. She helped me out of kindness."

Su Liang was simply flabbergasted, "I saved you, and now it's my fault?"

The monk shook his head and sighed, "It's all this humble monk's fault."

Su Liang found both Yan Shiba from last night and the monk today utterly speechless. She didn't bother to deal with him anymore and was about to get on the carriage and leave.

"Miss Su! Miss Su Liang!"

Hu Er's follower Xiaoliu ran through the crowd, "This is a gift my master prepared for you both!"

Su Liang took the parcel containing two fur-lined capes. Xiaoliu said his master was in the fur business, and these were sent especially by his old lady to thank Su Liang for treating Hu Er.

Seeing Su Liang accept the gift, Xiaoliu ran away.

As she was about to get in the carriage, she heard the monk ask, "Is the benefactor Miss Su Liang from Su Family Village?"

Su Liang turned around, "Yes, what's the matter?"

"Yesterday, I sent a benefactor named Yan to find Miss Su. I wonder if Miss Su got to see her? Is she alright?" The monk asked.

Su Liang had asked Yan Shiba who had saved her, and he had said, "A very pretty young man"...

Su Liang hadn't expected it to be a monk. Although he was indeed beautiful, his personality was the polar opposite of Yan Shiba's. One was a paranoid who didn't trust anyone, and the other was a saintly figure who saw the good in everyone.

"She's in Su Family Village; you can go and see for yourself." Su Liang got into the carriage as soon as she finished speaking.

"This humble monk needs to rush back to the temple, so I won't bother Benefactor Yan." The monk shook his head slightly, "Farewell."

As the monk passed the carriage, Su Liang asked Ning Jing, "Do you think he knows Yan Shiba is a bloodstained assassin?"

Ning Jing's expression was calm, "Even if he knew, he would still save her."

By the time they arrived in the county town, it was completely dark.

After a simple dinner, Su Liang and Ning Jing went straight to bed.

Early the next day, just as it was getting light, Ning Jing drove the carriage, taking Su Liang out of Bei'an County town and headed southeast towards the Provincial City.

Early in the morning, Mai Fei sent Chang'an to Su Family Village to invite Su Liang.

Last time they went to the mine, they encountered heavy rain and assassination attempts on the way, and couldn't make it there.

Nian Jincheng was visiting the mine today and would stay there when they arrived. Mai Fei was going together with him, and they had agreed to invite Su Liang as well.

But when Mai Fei and Nian Jincheng arrived at Feiyan Town, they thought Su Liang would come soon but saw Chang'an return alone.

"Master, Ning Jing and Miss Su left Su Family Village for the Provincial City yesterday!" Chang'an reported.

Mai Fei frowned, "Didn't they say they would leave on the eighth?"

Nian Jincheng also found it strange. He had intended to find another time to have a secret drink with Ning Jing, but they left early.

“This subordinate doesn’t know why.” Chang’an said, “But there’s someone at Miss Su’s house. A lady who claims to be her sister, named Su Jiujiu, is seriously injured. Miss Su entrusted the neighbors to take care of her.”

Mai Fei found it inexplicable. Of course, he knew whether Su Liang had a sister or not, who was this Su Jiujiu that suddenly appeared? And since she was injured and came to find Su Liang, why didn’t Su Liang take care of her herself and leave early instead?

“Since they’ve left, let it go; after all, they’ll be back in a while.” Mai Fei said,

“Check the background of that Su Jiujiu..”

Chapter 73: 073. Picked Up a Child

The originally clear weather turned cloudy with impending wind and rain after the team left Feiyan Town.

Chang’an thought of the last assassination attempt and advised Mai Fei to cancel today’s trip to the mine, fearing another accident.

Nian Jincheng looked up at the sky, “Your Highness, let’s go another day. I will escort you back to town.”

“Yes, Master! If it rains heavily, we won’t be able to see the workers at the mine!” Chang’an said.

“Forget it, let’s go back.” Mai Fei’s voice came from inside the carriage. Nian Jincheng ordered the team to turn around and head back to the county town.

As soon as they returned to Feiyan Town, raindrops the size of soybeans began to fall. Against the wind, the horses struggled to move forward, and the carriage couldn’t block the rain.

Nian Jincheng ordered a stop outside the Feiyan Restaurant. He escorted Mai Fei inside to take shelter from the rain and wait for it to subside.

The manager respectfully showed them to a private room on the second floor, serving hot water towels, hot tea, and dessert.

The window was closed, and the wind howled outside.

Mai Fei wiped his face and sighed, “This damn weather!”

Approaching noon, Nian Jincheng asked Mai Fei if he would like to have lunch here.

When they called the manager, he highly recommended two signature medicinal dishes, stating that one of the chicken soups tasted best when made with pears from a local ancient pear tree. That pear tree had burned down last month, and Feiyan Restaurant had only two pears left from their original purchase.

This was the manager’s recent marketing strategy, telling many customers that there were only two of the best pears left.

But of course, he wouldn't dare deceive Mai Fei and Nian Jincheng. The two pears bought from Su Liang were indeed the last ones, well-preserved. They were originally meant for the owner to eat, but since he said he wouldn't come this year, the manager decided to use them to entertain guests from the government office.

Mai Fei ordered several dishes, including the two medicinal diets.

"Su Liang and Ning Jing probably left the county town early this morning. They couldn't have gone too far, and they might encounter this rainstorm as well," Mai Fei said.

"Su Jiujiu..." Mai Fei seemed thoughtful, "Who did Su Liang learn her martial arts from? Where did she send Liu Xiaoyue? And who is this Su Jiujiu?"

Nian Jincheng didn't respond. All he knew was that Su Liang's martial arts were taught by Ning Jing but not entirely.

"If it weren't for her helping me several times, I would have suspected that she was a spy planted by someone under the guise of Su Liang." Mai Fei scoffed lightly.

Nian Jincheng's hand holding the tea cup paused slightly.

Objectively speaking, Mai Fei's guess was not unreasonable, considering his status; he should indeed be cautious about getting close to anyone.

But Nian Jincheng could not be objective because, in his eyes, Su Liang belonged to Ning Jing. He wanted to say that Mai Fei was overthinking things.

Originally, Mai Fei didn't have high expectations for the food at this restaurant in town, but the dishes were brought in with a tempting aroma. He tasted the Snow Pear Chicken Soup and found that the manager hadn't exaggerated; it was truly delicious.

The other medicinal dish was also excellent and suited the cold, windy, and rainy weather.

Mai Fei asked Chang'an to find the manager and buy the medicinal diet recipe. He then asked precisely where the ancient pear tree was, intending to send someone to buy the fruit and transport it back to the capital next year. He believed that the manager's story about the pear tree catching fire was fabricated.

Mai Fei's mother was an excellent cook, which had always endeared her to the emperor. Whenever Mai Fei encountered delicious food outside, he would bring back the recipes for her.

When Chang'an returned, he didn't get the medicinal diet recipe. The manager said he couldn't make the decision and needed to ask the owner. Regarding the pear tree, it indeed caught fire and was located in Su Family Village. They could go see it if they didn't believe him.

This was because Mai Fei's current apparent identity was just a county magistrate, and Nian Jincheng's general status wasn't explicitly revealed. The owner of Feiyan Restaurant had a connection with Xing Yusheng and was not an ordinary person.

If the manager knew that Mai Fei was the honorable Fourth Prince, he wouldn't dare refuse. But Chang'an wouldn't reveal Mai Fei's identity just for this reason.

“Su Family Village?” Mai Fei was momentarily stunned.

Chang'an smiled and said, “After questioning him several times, the manager admitted that the medicinal diet recipe was bought from a girl in Su Family

Village. It must be the Su girl we know.”

Thus, they could buy the medicinal diet recipe from Su Liang later.

“How come I didn't know that Su Yuanzhou's family has a secret medicinal diet recipe?” Mai Fei found it strange, “Where did Su Liang learn it?”

Nian Jincheng's expression was indifferent, “Miss Su is quite skilled in cooking. It may not necessarily be passed down from previous generations. She might have just tried it herself.”

Mai Fei nodded and laughed, “Indeed. If my mother met Su Liang, she would surely like her very much.”

How could Nian Jincheng not hear Mai Fei's interest and inquiries about Su Liang? He could only blame someone who had already gone through the wedding ceremony but still acted like siblings, giving other men the impression that they had a chance.

Speaking of Su Liang and Ning Jing, they realized the weather was changing when they were in a place with no nearby village or shop.

If they turned back to the town, they might encounter the frustrating situation of struggling back in a storm only for the rain to stop.

So Ning Jing sped up the carriage, intending to find a place to take shelter from the rain.

The wind grew stronger, and raindrops began to fall. From a distance, they saw a house up ahead.

As they approached with the carriage, they found it was an abandoned and dilapidated temple, and there were people inside.

Ning Jing drove the carriage into the courtyard enclosed by broken walls. Su Liang lifted the carriage curtain, and the four men inside, sitting together by a fire, all looked at her. Although they managed to control their expressions, two of them couldn't help swallowing saliva...

Su Liang withdrew her gaze, got off the carriage, and joined Ning Jing to cover the carriage with an oilcloth. The books inside were her treasures, and they couldn't get wet. The horse was tied to a pillar under the eaves.

The rain was getting heavier. Su Liang and Ning Jing walked in, and one of the four men spoke up, “If you two don't mind, you can join us by the fire to warm up.”

However, Su Liang spotted someone in the corner, or rather, a bald head... “The two benefactors meet again.” The handsome monk Su Liang and Ning Jing had met in town the day before seemed surprised, stood up, and greeted them with palms together.

Not wanting to deal with the four malicious-looking men, Su Liang headed towards the monk, “May I know your name, little master?”

“My dharma name is Cheng Yun.” The monk said, bending down to tidy up the straw on the ground and inviting Ning Jing and Su Liang to sit.

“Thank you.” Su Liang noticed Cheng Yun’s worn-out robe and the broken clothes, a water pouch and a cloth bag beside him, with half of a dried bun sticking out, probably from his alms.

Su Liang sat down, Ning Jing sat next to her, watching their carriage and horses outside.

The other group had their eyes on their carriage and horses too, murmuring from time to time.

“Do you know the name of the person you saved?” Su Liang asked Cheng Yun.

Cheng Yun nodded, “That female benefactor said her name is Yan Jiujiu.”

Anyone familiar with the name Yan Shiba could connect the two names, but the foolish monk obviously had no clue.

“Where did you save her? Without money, how did you send her to the Su Family Village?” Su Liang asked.

Cheng Yun explained that he was originally on his way to Huguo Temple in the capital city to deliver Buddhist scriptures to his master on his master’s orders. He had some money with him, and when he passed by a mountain cliff, he found “Yan Jiujiu” unconscious and severely injured. He intended to take her to a medical hall but she insisted on Cheng Yun taking her to Su Family Village to find her sister, or she would commit suicide...

Su Liang could imagine how Yan Shiba tortured this monk to achieve his goal.

“By the time I arrived at Feiyan Town, I had spent all my money. Fortunately, I got Yan benefactor back home, knowing she would be okay, I felt relieved.” Cheng Yun said softly.

Su Liang really wanted to say: That’s not her home, that’s my home...

The rain showed no sign of stopping, even though it was approaching noon, the sky was as dark as dusk. Ning Jing started a fire, and Su Liang grabbed a book and started reading it by herself.

Seeing that Su Liang was reading a medical book, Cheng Yun learned that she was a doctor, expressing admiration and believing that she must be a great, compassionate person.

However, not long after, Cheng Yun’s preconceptions were shattered...

Unable to restrain themselves any longer, one of the four men politely asked Su Liang and Ning Jing if they could share some food, offering cliché phrases such as “helping each other while traveling” and “meeting equals destiny.”

Ning Jing simply replied that they didn’t have enough food for themselves.

Seemingly finding a reason to cause trouble, two of the men got up and walked towards the carriage, claiming they wanted to see if Ning Jing was lying. Cheng Yun whispered, “If the two of you have any food, please share some with them.”

Having experienced the monk's disposition first-hand, Su Liang didn't get angry at his words. Instead, she quietly closed her book and handed it to Cheng Yun, "Hold this for me." She then stood up and walked outside.

But she was quickly stopped.

"Little Miss, did you elope with that pretty boy? Let me tell you, pretty boys are unreliable. They might just sell you someday. Why not let Big Brother take you home instead?"

"If I don't want to go home, I can just follow Big Brother!"

Cheng Yun saw the two men teasing Su Liang and frowned, then hurriedly rushed over to intervene.

Su Liang pushed Cheng Yun away, "Watch my book!" Then, she kicked the man who was trying to grab her.

At the same time, Ning Jing blocked the two who intended to steal their carriage, twisting their wrists emotionlessly.

Pig-like screams echoed back and forth in the broken temple.

Cheng Yun, holding the medical book in the corner, was shocked. Recalling the scene where Su Liang pulled a knife on a man in the street yesterday, he realized he had seriously misunderstood her. She might be a doctor, but a brutal one...

Su Liang knocked the two men down and saw a sack behind the spot where they were originally sitting, so she walked over.

Upon opening it, she found many ragged clothes, and a three or four-year-old boy with his eyes tightly closed, stuffed inside.

Su Liang's expression tightened as she quickly took the child out, checked his breath, relieved that he was still alive.

Ning Jing came back in and saw Su Liang holding a child, looking stunned for a moment.

Su Liang sighed, "What a day, I've picked up a kid.."

Chapter 74: 074. Kids are really strange

"Where did the child come from?" Su Liang's knife tip was only half an inch away from the man's eyes on the ground.

Cheng Yun whispered "Amitabha" and walked over, "Benefactor Su, let this poor monk talk to them."

"Alright." Su Liang nodded, "There are three more over there. You go talk to them."

Cheng Yun really went.

Su Liang's knife wobbled, the head bandit's face turned pale, and he shouted,

“The child...we bought him! We don’t know whose family he’s from!” “Why would you buy a child? Are you infertile?” Su Liang asked coldly.

“Buying him and reselling him would make a profit!” The head bandit’s voice trembled.

Trafficker? Su Liang’s face turned even colder, “Who wants to buy the child?”

In this world, traffickers mostly abducted and sold girls, selling them to brothels or as maids.

Those who couldn’t have sons to carry on the family line would usually adopt a nephew from their own family. Even if they found someone else’s child to impersonate as their own, it had to be a child under one year old.

Moreover, the child had fair skin, delicate features, and finely embroidered

patterns on his satin clothes, not looking like he came from an ordinary family. “No... We haven’t found a buyer yet...” The head bandit said.

“Really?” Su Liang’s voice hadn’t yet fallen when the sharp knife suddenly left the head bandit’s eyes. He let out a breath of relief, only to scream shrilly.

That was because Su Liang’s knife had pierced through his palm and nailed it to the ground.

Cheng Yun looked over at the sound, his face full of shock, “Benefactor Su, let’s talk peacefully!”

“I hope you can make those three give up their confessions before I fill him with bloody holes.” Su Liang snorted. What was the point of being polite to the traffickers?

Cheng Yun sighed, looking at the three men, and said earnestly, “You have done wrong, repent as soon as possible, and the little monk can beg Benefactor

Su to spare your lives.”

The three men looked at each other and then at their boss.

Su Liang pulled out the knife and stabbed through the boss’s other hand.

The three men shrank their necks, but still didn’t speak up.

Cheng Yun continued to persuade them, mentioning how the child’s parents must be very worried at this time.

The child was placed in the corner by Su Liang, and Ning Jing sat beside him, watching.

Suddenly, the child’s eyelashes trembled, and Ning Jing called out to Su Liang.

Su Liang put down the knife and went over, just as the child was waking up.

He glanced at Ning Jing and then at Su Liang, and a layer of mist rose in his dark eyes, almost crying, “Mom... I want my mom... wah wah wah...”

Su Liang said to Ning Jing, “You comfort him.”

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

Su Liang squatted down, grasped the child's small hands, and smiled, "Don't be afraid, I'm the good guy."

Feeling weird, he realized that those who claimed to be good guys were generally the bad guys...

The child cried even harder, "Mom..."

Su Liang picked up the child and placed him in Ning Jing's arms, "You find a way to make him stop crying." As soon as she finished speaking, she went back to pull the knife from the ground, ignored the head bandit, and walked towards the three men being persuaded by Cheng Yun.

"Move aside." Su Liang said coldly, "They think they're safe as long as their boss can take it. They're not going to listen to you."

"Benefactor Su, don't commit a murderous deed!" Cheng Yun hurriedly said.

Su Liang nodded, "Alright, I won't let them die, but I'll make them wish they were dead. That's cosmic retribution, not a murderous act."

Cheng Yun wanted to say something but found himself at a loss for words.

By then, Su Liang had already chosen the weakest of the three, "I want to know what you do. Speak up or end up crippled like that man!"

"I'll say..." Knowing that Su Liang meant business, the man confessed quickly and said the child was the grandson of the head of Li family, one of the four major business families.

Su Liang had heard from Yang Yu about the four major business families in Qian Country: Wan, Li, Ning, and Yan. They were involved in the businesses of food, ceramics, tea, and silk respectively.

Su Liang was acquainted with Ning Jing and Yang Yu but knew nothing about the Wan and Li families.

The man then told the story behind the incident.

Third Master Li was a notorious womanizer with many wives and concubines and even more children, but they were all daughters and not a single son.

Four years ago, Third Master Li caused a huge scandal when he divorced his wife for a new love. The wife he divorced was the daughter of the Wan family.

It was also rumored that Miss Wan could no longer bear Third Master Li's philandering ways but had to endure it for the sake of face and business cooperation between the two families for a few years.

One wanted to divorce, and the other wanted to leave, so they soon severed ties. Miss Wan returned to her family, and Third Master Li married a new wife soon after.

The most interesting part of the story was that a few days after Miss Wan returned to her family, she remarried with a matchmaking ceremony! She and Third Master Li both chose the same day for their second weddings!

So many people said Miss Wan was not content either and had long been involved with someone else behind the scenes.

Eight months later, Miss Wan gave birth to a son. A little over a month later, Third Master Li's new wife gave birth to a daughter.

The Wan family said Miss Wan had given birth prematurely.

But many people said the son was Third Master Li's.

"In recent years, Third Master has been continually taking new concubines. They all give birth to daughters, but he never has a son. He consulted a master and was told that he was destined to have one son. So he thought the master meant that his only son in his life was actually born by his ex-wife. He wanted to get the child back, but the Wan family wouldn't let him in the door."

Su Liang was dumbfounded, "So that child is the one the Li family wants to take from the Wan family?"

The man nodded, "Third Master knows that if the Wan family loses the child, they'll definitely come looking for him at Li family. So he asked us to take the child to Fourth Miss's in-laws in Pingbei City and let her take care of him. Then figure out how to bring him back."

Su Liang knew Pingbei City, which was the destination for her and Ning Jing.

"You...are from the Li family?" Su Liang asked coldly. They slipped up later on by calling Third Master and Fourth Miss, which outsiders wouldn't do.

The man's face stiffened, admitting it implicitly.

Their initial reluctance to admit it was because they were afraid the matter would become too big to handle since their most important task was to keep it a secret.

The four of them were on a secret mission, extremely cautious on the road. After obtaining the child successfully and in their moment of relaxation, they met the beautiful girl Su Liang during a heavy rain. Seeing the seemingly vulnerable Su Liang and Ning Jing, their lust and greed led them to have evil intentions, never expecting that they would stumble here after so much effort.

"Ladies, the child is a seed from the Li family! We're just taking him back to acknowledge his ancestry! We're not harming him! As long as you let us go, Third Master will give you as much money as you want!"

The boss on the ground gritted his teeth in anger. He was the most skilled in martial arts among them but clearly not the sharpest

The one chosen by Su Liang as seemingly the most timid was actually the most astute, knowing how to protect himself.

"Alright." Su Liang nodded crisply, "You go back and find Third Master Li, have him pay the ransom. A month later, in Xunyang City."

The group hadn't expected the righteous Su Liang to suddenly turn into a kidnapper, so they asked her how much money she wanted.

“One hundred thousand taels.” Su Liang had no concept of the wealth of these big merchants, so she blurted out a number.

Seeing the expressions on the faces of the three people, it seemed to be within the acceptable range for the Li family.

“Why go to Xunyang City?” Someone asked, “Who are you?”

“Good question.” Su Liang smiled, “You don’t even recognize him? Take another look?”

All four of them looked in the direction Su Liang was pointing. Ning Jing was frowning, holding the crying child with a stiff body, mechanically patting the child’s back gently.

“He is the only legitimate son of the Ning Family, Ning Jing.” Su Liang said. “Wasn’t the seventh young master of the Ning family expelled from the family?” Someone blurted out.

Su Liang nodded, “It was a temporary measure. Without Ning Jing, could the

Ning Family still be called the Ning Family? I was sent by the eldest son of the Ning Family, Ning Yao, to bring Seventh Young Master home. Afraid of any accidents on the road, we pretended to be siblings.”

“I heard that Seventh Young Master Ning was in Bei’an County for the Imperial examination and even won the title of the best in the exam.” Someone said.

Su Liang nodded again, “It seems you all know. I finally persuaded Seventh Young Master to follow me back. I was about to escort him to Pingbei City for the examination, and then return to Xunyang City. The Li family and Ning family have a lot of business dealings, we won’t hurt the child. We just want money to see Third Master Li’s sincerity. My eldest young master Ning Yao will be waiting in Xunyang City for Third Master Li, if he doesn’t come then our Ning family can only negotiate with the Wan family.”

After talking, Su Liang threw all four of them out and told them to leave quickly.

The four of them helped each other walk into the rain.

“Is that really Ning Qi?”

“It must be! He was in Bei’an County before! Otherwise, it wouldn’t be such a coincidence!”

“That woman under Ning Yao is so powerful!”

“Otherwise, how would a bastard be in charge of the Ning family?”

“Quick, go back and report to Third Master! It’s the Ning Family from Xunyang who took Young Master Li hostage and are threatening Li Family!”

In the broken temple, Ning Jing still couldn’t calm the crying child.

Su Liang realized that she had forgotten to ask those people what the child's name was.

Cheng Yun also tried to coax the child, and Ning Jing quickly handed the child over to him.

"Let him touch your bald head." Su Liang suggested.

Cheng Yun bowed his head and caught the child's little hand, placing it on his bald head.

The child touched it twice and blinked, finally stopped crying...

"Cheng Yun, you take him back to Wan Family." Su Liang said.

Cheng Yun immediately shook his head, "This humble monk can live alone without any problem, but he is too young. It's not OK."

"I'll give you money so that you won't have to live on the streets." Su Liang took out two banknotes, "Do you know Martial Arts?"

Cheng Yun nodded, "Yes."

Su Liang snorted, "You were beaten in the street yesterday without even fighting back?"

"My master taught me that Martial Arts is meant to help others, not to hurt them. Yesterday's incident, if Benefactor Su hadn't intervened, they would have beaten me and let it go. The female benefactor would have been fine." Cheng Yun said solemnly.

Su Liang didn't want to argue more with Cheng Yun about yesterday's right and wrong, "In that case, you can help this poor baby and send him back to his mother. I believe you can protect him."

Since he was able to send Yan Shiba away, it meant his original task wasn't urgent.

Su Liang asked Cheng Yun to hand the child over to Ning Jing while she tested his Martial Arts skills.

"I'll do it." Ning Jing obviously had some fear of the little crybaby, so he stood up and said that he would fight Cheng Yun, letting Su Liang hold the child.

So, Su Liang picked up the child and swayed gently, singing a nursery rhyme to him.

The child sensed Su Liang's kindness, stopped crying and snuggled up to her face.

"Call me Auntie." Su Liang smiled softly.

"Auntie..." The child called her in a childish voice.

"Good boy." Su Liang wiped the child's tears and asked gently, "What's your name?"

"Zhengzheng..." The child answered.

On the other side, Ning Jing and Cheng Yun were fighting, both unarmed.

Cheng Yun's moves looked mild at first glance but were quite ingenious.

After a few dozen moves, there was still no winner.

"I didn't expect you to be so powerful, Zhengzheng will definitely be fine with you." Su Liang waved Zhengzheng's little hand at Ning Jing and Cheng Yun.

Ning Jing looked at the child who had been crying heartbreakingly not long ago but was now grinning at him, raised his hand and waved twice at Zhengzheng. Feeling strange, he silently put his hand down.

"Su benefactor, what you said to those people just now..." Cheng Yun asked.

Su Liang snorted, "You don't need to worry about that. This child may not be of Li family blood, but he's definitely born of his mother and should be sent back to the Wan family. If the Li family discovers through a blood test or some other method that this is not his son, they may harm the child. Those people didn't dare tell the truth at first because what Li's planning to do is shady, and they didn't dare to spread the word."

Cheng Yun nodded, "What Benefactor Su said is reasonable."

"When you see Zhengzheng's mother, if she asks, just tell her everything that happened here today, but nothing else." Su Liang said.

"If Third Master Li goes to the Ning family for an exchange in a month..."

Cheng Yun frowned.

Su Liang snorted, "I told you not to worry so much about it."

Third Master Li will find Ning Yao to get the child. The Wan family will see Cheng Yun, and they will know about this incident.

Wouldn't it be a beautiful scene if all three families come together in Xunyang City and start fighting?

Zhengzheng didn't know what the adults were talking about, he laughed and leaned over, kissed Su Liang's cheek, and sweetly called, "Auntie!"

Ning Jing spoke in a faint voice, "Kids are so strange.."

Chapter 75: 075. Experience with the baby

There were only three adults and one child left in the broken temple, and it was uncertain when the heavy rain would stop.

Su Liang and Ning Jing had their own bedding in their carriages, so if it didn't stop raining by nightfall, they would have to stay in the dilapidated temple.

Ning Jing fetched an umbrella and went to the carriage, taking out a box of Osmanthus Cake and two fur cloaks given by Hu Er when they passed by Feiyan Town yesterday.

Cheng Yun was adding wood to the fire.

Zhengzheng leaned against Su Liang's chest, and she gently asked him what he remembered while rubbing his little hands.

The Kid was only a little over three years old and couldn't remember his mother's name, but he did remember that the four bad uncles were very scary.

"One for you and one for him," Ning Jing handed Su Liang both of the fur cloaks.

Su Liang took the woman's cloak and wore it.

She then took the men's cloak and wrapped Zhengzheng up in it, leaving only his adorable little face exposed.

"Say, 'Thank you, Uncle Ning.'" Su Liang taught Zhengzheng.

Zhengzheng looked at Ning Jing, smiling so widely that his eyes disappeared, and mimicked in his babyish voice, "Thank you, Ning... Uncle!"

Ning Jing gave a grunt, opened the box of Osmanthus Cake, and let Su Liang feed it to Zhengzheng.

"I'm cold. You feed him." Su Liang didn't want to move her arms.

Though it was already winter, she disliked wearing too much clothing. The sudden drop in temperature due to the rain made her sneeze twice, but she felt much better after wrapping herself in the fur cloak.

Ning Jing went outside again to wash his hands with rainwater, wiped them clean, and returned to break the Osmanthus Cake into small pieces to feed Zhengzheng. He had an iron water bladder, which he warmed up by the fire before pouring the hot water into a small cup and feeding it to Zhengzheng.

After eating two pieces of Osmanthus Cake and drinking two small cups of water, Zhengzheng shook his little head and didn't forget to say, "Thank you, Ning... Uncle!"

Su Liang was so sleepy from warming herself by the fire that she eventually fell asleep holding Zhengzheng.

When Zhengzheng rubbed his eyes and sat up, Su Liang was still asleep.

"What's wrong?" Ning Jing, who had been sitting nearby reading a book, looked up and asked Zhengzheng, speaking to him as if he were an adult.

"Pee..." Zhengzheng stretched his hand awkwardly toward Ning Jing.

It took Ning Jing a moment to understand that Zhengzheng needed to urinate, so he picked him up, still wrapped in the fur cloak, and carried him outside.

Cheng Yun was standing outside and smiled when he saw them, saying, "The rain is getting lighter."

When Su Liang woke up, the sky was much brighter, and the child was gone. She looked up to see Ning Jing holding Zhengzheng, who was reaching out to touch Cheng Yun's bald head—a warm and cozy scene...

"The rain is almost stopped." Su Liang walked out, "Cheng Yun, take

Zhengzheng with you and head to Bei'an County town before dark to stay the night. Buy a carriage and some clothes tomorrow, then send him home."

“Auntie! Auntie!” As soon as Zhengzheng saw Su Liang, he wanted to go to her, seemingly quite fond of her.

The heavy rain finally stopped.

The air was fresh, the sky was bright, and a beautiful rainbow appeared in the eastern sky.

Su Liang pointed it out to Zhengzheng, whose little face was full of wonder and excitement as he clapped his hands.

“Let’s pack up and go,” Su Liang said, “If we start now, we can find a place to stay before dark. Zhengzheng, you’re going back home with Uncle Cheng Yun.”

Zhengzheng seemed to understand and nodded his head, but when Su Liang tried to hand him over to Cheng Yun, he tucked his head into the crook of her neck and completely lost interest in Cheng Yun’s bald head.

“Are all children this clingy?” Ning Jing asked with a frown.

Cheng Yun shook his head, “This humble monk doesn’t know.”

Listening to them discuss children’s clinginess in all seriousness, Su Liang was at a loss for words, “Ning Jing, what do you think we should do?”

“We can’t just abandon him.” Ning Jing left the comment hanging and went inside to pack.

Cheng Yun put his palms together, “You both have kind hearts and will surely take good care of Zhengzheng. I’ll set off now to inform his family. Where should Zhengzheng’s mother meet him?”

Su Liang asked, “How long will it take you to reach the Wan Family? How far is it from Pingbei City?”

Cheng Yun thought for a moment before answering, “It will take me three to five days to get there at the fastest. From the Wan Family to Pingbei City is a six-to-seven-day journey if we travel quickly.”

The Wan Family was located in the southeast direction, and after the four men had kidnapped Zhengzheng, they had purposely detoured into this area to avoid pursuit.

“We’ll be in Pingbei City by the 18th of this month,” Su Liang stated. Cheng Yun nodded, “Alright.” He then prepared to leave.

Su Liang handed him a silver banknote.

Cheng Yun initially refused, but Su Liang said, “Buy a horse if you need it and travel as fast as possible. Don’t waste time because you don’t have money. You can ask the Wan Family to pay us back later.”

Cheng Yun accepted the money and said goodbye to Ning Jing and Zhengzheng.

Su Liang waved at him with Zhengzheng’s hand, “Take care.”

After extinguishing the fire in the ruined temple and cleaning up, Su Liang and Zhengzheng got into the carriage, and Ning Jing took the reins, continuing their journey.

“Let’s switch. You can rest in the carriage, ” Su Liang said to Ning Jing.

“No need,” Ning Jing refused.

Su Liang wrapped Zhengzheng in a blanket from the carriage and handed Ning Jing a cloak, “Put this on.”

“Put on!” Zhengzheng stuck his head out, mimicking Su Liang’s words.

Ning Jing took the cloak with one hand and pushed Zhengzheng back into the carriage with the other.

Zhengzheng giggled, thinking Ning Jing was playing a game with him. He tried to get out of the carriage again but was caught by Su Liang, “It’s cold outside. Don’t catch a cold.”

At nightfall, Ning Jing and Su Liang arrived at the next city, found an inn, and rented an independent guesthouse at the back where they could park their carriage.

The food at the inn was mediocre, but it was comforting to have something warm to eat in cold weather.

They ordered some egg custard for Zhengzheng, but Ning Jing didn’t eat much and soon went out.

When Su Liang finished coaxing Zhengzheng to eat, Ning Jing returned with a bundle of clothes and shoes for him. The little guy’s clothes hadn’t been changed and were dirty.

“You give him a bath, and then take him to sleep with you tonight?” Su Liang suggested to Ning Jing.

“He might not want to,” Ning Jing replied.

Su Liang chuckled, “Just give him a smile, and it’ll be fine.”

Ning Jing looked at Zhengzheng’s smiling face and picked him up in his arms.

At first, Zhengzheng thought Ning Jing was going to play with him and was delighted. But when he saw that Ning Jing was carrying him out the door and

Su Liang was soon out of sight, he started kicking his legs, wanting to go back.

Ning Jing stopped and said seriously, “Men and women should keep their distance.”

Zhengzheng’s little face looked confused, and before he could react, Ning Jing carried him into the next room.

Before long, Su Liang heard Zhengzheng’s cheerful laughter from the next room. She felt relieved and planned to read a bit more after washing up.

However, Su Liang didn’t know that Ning Jing had to threaten Zhengzheng with “I’ll beat you if you keep messing around” to get him to take a bath quietly, even though Zhengzheng neither understood nor cared about the consequences.

It took quite a while to bathe the child, wrap him up, and put him on the bed, Then he kept sliding down.

Finally, Ning Jing wrapped him in a blanket, tied him to the bedpost, and went to take a bath.

Su Liang heard Zhengzheng next door, sweetly calling uncle all the time while thinking Ning Jing had quite a way with kids!

When it was time to sleep, Zhengzheng wanted to find Su Liang. So, Ning Jing lay in bed, lifting him up and putting him down.

Zhengzheng quickly fell in love with this game and forgot all about Su Liang for a while.

So, Ning Jing spent a considerable time lifting weights before bedtime, finally exhausting the energetic child, who fell asleep beside him.

Ning Jing let out a long sigh, tucked Zhengzheng in, and gently lamented, “Kids are really troublesome.”

The next day, when it was time to leave, Su Liang offered to take the reins, but Ning Jing refused again, “You take the daytime shift, and I’ll do the nighttime shift. ”

Playing with a child was more tiring than driving.

Su Liang found the arrangement reasonable and accepted it.

She had no experience taking care of children, either, especially such a young one who required constant attention, unlike Zhuzi, who could already entertain herself.

Ning Jing listened to Su Liang telling Zhengzheng fairy tales. After two stories, Zhengzheng wanted to go outside the carriage.

“Ning Jing, he insists on going out. What should I do?” Su Liang sounded a bit helpless. You couldn’t reason with a child that young.

“Give him to me,” Ning Jing reached in, picked Zhengzheng up, and wrapped him against his chest, leaving only his eyes exposed. He wouldn’t be cold this way, and he could enjoy the view.

“Uncle Ning, what’s that?”

“A cow.” “What’s a cow?” “A cow.” “What’s a cow?”

“A cow is a cow.”

Soon, Su Liang discovered that Ning Jing, who was always eager to learn new things, quickly learned how to communicate with a three-year-old child and how to comfort him and find his interests.

At first, the child always clung to Su Liang, but later he preferred to be with Ning Jing, even though Ning Jing didn’t smile at him or speak to him in a gentle, coaxing tone.

As a result, Su Liang could continue reading while they traveled, as she originally planned, without being too affected.

A few days later, Su Liang asked Ning Jing, “Do you still find children strange?”

Ning Jing thought for a moment and replied, “What’s strange are adults who think too much.” A child’s feelings are pure – they become close to whoever treats them well.

Su Liang agreed and laughed, “Great God, after meeting Zhengzheng, have you ever wanted to be a father?”

Ning Jing pondered for a moment, shook his head, and said, “I can’t bear children. In the future, if I marry, whether or not we have a child will be up to my wife..”

Chapter 76: 076. The Miss of Qianshan Academy

Travel during the day, stay at inns during the night.

When Su Liang and Ning Jing arrived at Pingbei City with their child, it was the tenth day of October, and there were only five days left before the Provincial Exam.

Pingbei City was the largest city in the northern part of Qian Country. It was just past noon, and the city gates were bustling with people coming and going.

Exhausted from playing, Zhengzheng was sound asleep in the carriage.

Early in the morning, Su Liang had put on men’s clothing and carefully applied makeup, looking like a young nobleman.

She lifted the carriage curtain and glanced outside at the towering city gate, which was much more grand than Bei’an County town.

There was a routine inspection at the city gate, so Su Liang hid Zhengzheng wrapped in a blanket behind her, not letting anyone see him.

Ning Jing, wearing a straw hat and gray coarse clothes, claimed to be a servant bringing his young master from Beiqing County for the exam.

At that time, the four people who were released said that they were supposed to bring Zhengzheng to Pingbei City to be taken care of by the Fourth Miss Li, who had married into the local Li family. They also knew that Su Liang and Ning Jing would come, and there might be people waiting to intercept them here.

“Looking for a man and a woman with a three-year-old child.”

“Two men, not from Bei’an County.”

After the two soldiers whispered to each other, they quickly let Su Liang and Ning Jing pass.

After entering the city, Ning Jing and Su Liang didn’t go to the inn; instead, they went to find a real estate agent to buy a house.

At this time, the money Su Liang earned from Mai Fei in the past became useful. She temporarily didn’t intend to use the token from Yang Yu to withdraw money.

With the enthusiastic introduction of the property agent, the generous Su Liang chose a quiet house in the center of Pingbei City and bought it.

All the procedures for transferring ownership and paying taxes at the Government Office were delegated to the agent. To save trouble and ensure efficiency, Su Liang gave him a substantial amount of tip money.

The house was not too big or too small, had everything it should have, and was very clean since it had been well maintained regularly.

For security reasons, Su Liang and Ning Jing still chose to live in the same courtyard.

They brought their own bedding, just needing to buy some kitchen utensils before they could settle in.

Zhengzheng finally had a place where he could run freely. In the blink of an eye, he disappeared, and no one could see his figure. After a while, if they didn't go looking for him, he would come out on his own, happily playing hide and seek with Su Liang and Ning Jing. Sometimes the two would cooperate with him, and sometimes they would deliberately pretend not to find him even though they knew where he was.

"A few more days left, do you want to go to Qianshan Academy?" Su Liang asked Ning Jing.

As the top scorer in the Bei'an County Court Examination, Ning Jing had the opportunity to study at the Qianshan Academy before the Provincial Exam, but he had given up on it at the time.

Now, if he went, he should still be able to, and there might even be some special tutoring before the exam.

"I won't go." Ning Jing said.

"Alright. You stay at home and watch Zhengzheng, I'll go out and buy pots and ingredients." Su Liang said.

Seeing Su Liang go out, Zhengzheng wanted to follow, but Ning Jing called out to him, and Zhengzheng happily ran back and jumped into Ning Jing's arms.

With all the things from the carriage unloaded, Su Liang went out alone to shop.

Today happened to be a day off for the Qianshan Academy, and there were many scholars wearing gray and white uniforms on the streets.

Su Liang ran into the top three scorers from the Bei'an County Court Examination, who were shopping together.

If Ning Jing appeared, they would definitely recognize him at a glance.

First, Su Liang went to buy the necessary pots and bowls, then bought a lot of groceries and meat, and finally went to the clothing store to buy new clothes for her, Ning Jing, and Zhengzheng.

Seeing a red satin hat with a small fluffy ball on it, hanging in the most conspicuous position in the store, Su Liang asked for it without asking the price. She thought it was perfect for Zhengzheng, and it didn't matter if it was a bit expensive.

As she passed the Book Shop, she went in to pick out a bunch of miscellaneous books she hadn't seen before, and placed them all in the carriage.

Since the Provincial Exam was approaching, the bookstore had a special rack for book boxes. They came in various materials, some of which looked very high-end.

Su Liang saw some scholars carrying them on the street and thought that now that they had money, Ning Jing didn't need to go to the exam with just a basket like during the Court Examination. She went over to ask the price.

Seeing that Su Liang was not short of money, the shop assistant strongly recommended the most expensive one, but she preferred a lighter one with a more practical internal design and bought it.

As Su Liang shopped along the way, she returned home with a full load, and was rewarded with a warm hug from little steamed bun Zhengzheng.

When Ning Jing saw the book box and frowned slightly, Su Liang quickly said, "I know it's not as good as the one you made yourself, but there's no time now, so make do with it."

Ning Jing cleaned all the bought kitchenware, and with Zhengzheng in his arms, he lit the fire while Su Liang cooked a sumptuous dinner.

Originally, she wanted to steam a minced meat and egg custard for Zhengzheng only, but she thought Ning Jing would definitely ask, "Can't adults eat it?" so she made three servings in the end.

Zhengzheng ate until his little belly was round, and Su Liang gently rubbed it for him. He closed his eyes happily, saying, "Uncle Ning... Aunt..."

Later, it became, "Uncle... Aunt Ning..."

When Su Liang bought the house, she chose it because there was a large open space in the back garden where she could practice martial arts.

Early in the morning, she got up to jog, practiced a set of boxing techniques, and then practiced her sword skills just as the sky was getting light.

Ning Jing had prepared the hot water, and hearing Zhengzheng calling for someone in the room, he quickly walked back in.

Su Liang felt that if Ning Jing ever had a child, he would be an excellent father.

Although they were now in a big city, Su Liang and Ning Jing had momentarily resumed their daily life in Su Family Village. Other than having an additional child to take care of, nothing else had changed.

Ning Jing brought some basic woodworking tools when he came, and with some ropes and wooden boards, he built a small swing for Zhengzheng in the courtyard, complete with a safety guard.

After hearing Su Liang's description, he also made a stack of building blocks for Zhengzheng. Each piece was polished, and they were exquisite, except they were not colored.

So on a sunny afternoon, the stone table in the courtyard was filled with many building blocks and a plump child wearing a cute red hat.

Ning Jing sat beside him, playing with the blocks together with Zhengzheng.

As the two of them cooperated to combine the blocks into different shapes each time, Zhengzheng would call out to Su Liang in the room, making sure she saw their efforts.

With the window open, Su Liang, who was sitting in the room reading, would give a thumbs up and praise, "Zhengzheng is awesome!"

Zhengzheng imitated her with a thumbs up to Ning Jing and said with a smile,

“Uncle is awesome!”

Su Liang chuckled, “Ning Jing, it’s your turn to praise me.”

Ning Jing looked at Su Liang, and said lightly, “Keep reading.”

Su Liang: ... He was playing with a child, and yet he was acting so aloof. Seriously.

Since entering the city, Ning Jing hadn’t left the house, and Su Liang, disguised as a man, went out to buy things without taking the child.

They didn’t know that besides people watching the city gate all these days, there were also people searching every inn in the city. However, no trace of their arrival could be found, regardless of the various descriptions they had been given.

On the fourteenth day of October, Ning Jing had to go out.

All scholars who are attending the Provincial Exam tomorrow need to register at the Qianshan Academy and get a badge. Without a badge, they won’t be able to enter the Examination Hall on the day.

“You go by yourself.” Su Liang said.

Because of Ning Jing’s background and the fact that he was using Crown Prince Bei Jingwang’s badge to participate in the Imperial examination, he was already drawing attention. If people saw him with a woman and child, some absurd rumors might spread.

Ning Jing carried the book box Su Liang had bought for him, filled with water and some of Su Liang’s homemade tasty desserts.

Jing liked it very much.

Thinking that Ning Jing was leaving for good and not coming back, the Kid clung to his leg and refused to let go.

It didn’t work when Su Liang tried to coax him either.

Ning Jing picked up the Kid, looked into his eyes, and said, “You stay home.”

Not caring what he said, the Kid just tightly hugged his neck and wouldn’t let go. If anyone tried to separate them, he would cry out.

Ning Jing put down the book box, took out the basket Su Liang had bought for him the day before to carry things, wiped it clean with a wet cloth, put a small blanket inside, and then put the Kid in, covering it with a lid.

Thinking it was a game of hide-and-seek, the Kid peeped out from under the lid and laughed happily.

Su Liang held her forehead, “Are you sure you want to take him to the academy with you? It’ll be hard not to be discovered.”

Ning Jing took the things from the book box and put them into the basket, carried the basket on his back, and the Kid peeped in and out, playing happily.

“Don’t come out unless I call you,” Ning Jing said, looking back.

The Kid giggled.

Su Liang thought, if he could understand, remember, and do as he was told, it would be a miracle...

However, even if they were discovered, it wouldn’t have any serious consequences, so Su Liang let them be.

Watching Ning Jing leaving with the Kid, the Kid’s little hand stretched out, waving goodbye to Su Liang as if to say, “I’m going to play with Uncle!”

Many carriages stopped at the foot of Baiyun Mountain, blocking the road.

Ning Jing walked alone, carrying the basket on his back, as he made his way through the crowd.

“Master Ning!”

Ning Jing heard it, but the voice was unfamiliar, so he ignored it. There could be other people with the last name Ning.

There were rapid footsteps, and someone caught up.

It was a well-dressed, sharp-eyed old man who stopped Ning Jing and politely asked, “Are you from Bei’an County?”

Ning Jing stopped walking but didn’t answer.

The old man introduced himself, “I’m the manager of Yonglong Embroidery

Workshop in Pingbei City, and the master of my family’s name is Yang.” Only then did Ning Jing speak, “What’s the matter?”

“Are you Master Ning?” the old man said with a smile, “Our master had sent word last month that her friend, Miss Su, and Master Ning would be coming to Pingbei City, so she had asked me to prepare a mansion specifically to host you. We had sent someone to wait at the city gate but didn’t see when you arrived. So, we thought Master Ning would come to register at the academy today, and we’ve been waiting here.”

“How did you know it was me?” Ning Jing asked.

The old man laughed in response, “Our master had sent a portrait along with the letter so that we wouldn’t mistake someone else for you.”

“Thank you. There is nothing to trouble you with for now,” Ning Jing said.

“May I ask where Master Ning is staying? The mansion is ready and can be moved into at any time,” the old man said.

“Someone will come and find you at the Embroidery Workshop tomorrow,” Ning Jing said, before continuing to walk up the hill.

The old man pondered for a moment, thinking that Ning Jing meant he didn't need anything today and would see about it tomorrow. So, he just returned.

Ning Jing didn't doubt that this person was arranged by Yang Yu because those lurking in the dark who wanted to cause trouble didn't know the relationship between Su Liang, Ning Jing, and Yang Yu.

Ning Jing walked along a small path to a deserted area and called softly, "Kid."

Obediently staying in the basket, the Kid emerged now that he was given the signal, his head poking out and hands holding the rim of the basket as he looked at the vastly different scenery in the mountain with a surprised expression.

This was the game Ning Jing had agreed with the Kid beforehand. He could only come out when his name was called, and he had to go back when the basket was tapped.

As the Qianshan Academy appeared in sight, Ning Jing tapped the basket twice, and the Kid obediently sat back down, even moving the lid to cover it more tightly.

"Master Ning!"

A scholar from Bei'an County stood at the entrance of the academy, yelling from afar when he saw Ning Jing.

Instantly, a commotion arose.

Although Ning Jing had never been to Qianshan Academy before, he was well known there.

That's because he was the first scholar in the history of the academy to receive a free admission qualification and yet didn't attend.

It's worth noting that the academy is well known throughout Qian Country, and many students from other regions have struggled to find ways to secure admission.

Many people asked the three scholars from Bei'an County about Ning Jing; two of them said they didn't know him well, and the one who ranked alongside Ning Jing hinted that he was arrogant because he had a patron.

So, Ning Jing's "self-important" reputation spread. Adding to his background, some people who only knew his name but had never seen him made up a lot of rumors about him.

The most outrageous rumor was that Ning Jing was "the male pet of Crown Prince Bei Jingwang Xing Yusheng" circulating in the Qianshan Academy.

Ning Jing, a "famous person," instantly became the focus upon his arrival.

Walking to the entrance of the academy, two fellow scholars from Bei'an County greeted him warmly as if they were hometown acquaintances.

However, they had only seen him on the day of the Court Examination and the day when Mai Fei hosted the dinner afterward.

In fact, Ning Jing had saved their lives, but they didn't know it.

Ning Jing just nodded and asked them where to register.

The two scholars had already gotten their badges and volunteered to take Ning Jing to the registration spot.

All the way there, they attracted attention.

After seeing Ning Jing's real face today, the rumor that he was a certain crown prince's male pet resurfaced because he was just too good-looking...

Registering was quite simple; confirm your identity, receive the examination badge, glance over the posted exam instructions, and then you could leave.

Ning Jing took his badge and thanked the two guiding scholars before leaving when a student ran over, "Where is Master Ning Jing? The dean is asking for him!"

For a moment, the gazes of the people around Ning Jing changed again.

Under the scrutiny of everyone, Ning Jing, with the basket on his back, followed someone leading the way through most of the academy until they reached the entrance of a quiet little courtyard.

"Please come in, Master Ning." The guide stepped away after speaking.

Before entering, Ning Jing tapped the basket twice to remind the Kid to hide well.

As soon as he stepped into the courtyard, a figure in light green ran towards him, and the crisp voice filled with excitement rang out, "Brother Jing!"

Chapter 77: 077. As one wave subsides, another rises

"Xueqing, you should call him Brother Ning."

A gentle and honest male voice came from the open room.

The girl about to reach out to Ning Jing only a meter away from her hesitated and said, "Alright!" Her round eyes filled with laughter, then she gave a formal bow, "Brother Ning, nice to see you again."

The girl had fair skin, a beautiful face, and her eyes sparkled lively when she smiled.

"Mm." Ning Jing just replied lightly.

The girl reached out her hand, "Where's the gift you promised me?"

"Sorry, I forgot." But Ning Jing's voice didn't convey any hint of apology, devoid of emotion.

Stunned, the girl heard the voice inside the room again, "Xueqing, don't make a fuss."

"Alright." The girl pursed her lips and gestured, "Brother Ning, please come in. Father has been waiting for you for a long time."

Ning Jing nodded slightly and walked forward. Seeing Ning Jing's back basket, the girl muttered to herself in confusion, "Did Brother Ning become like this because of the changes at home..."

When Ning Jing arrived at the door, a sigh came from inside, "Come in."

As he entered, he saw a thin and elegant middle-aged man sitting by the window. Sporting a meticulously trimmed beard and dressed in a gray gown, he looked at Ning Jing with a hint of concern in his eyes.

This man was the dean of Qianshan Academy, one of the most famous scholars in Qian Country today, named Lin Shuzhi.

The one who had just run out to greet Ning Jing was Lin Shuzhi's youngest daughter, Lin Xueqing. After entering the room, Ning Jing didn't take the initiative to speak but stood quietly with his eyes downcast.

After a long sigh, Lin Shuzhi broke the silence, "That time, you received a family letter saying that your mother was critically ill, and you hurriedly left the academy. It seems like only yesterday."

Ning Jing remained silent.

"Forget it, let's not mention those things." Lin Shuzhi shook his head, stood up, and looked directly at Ning Jing, "You care deeply and are sensitive. After all those events, I was fearful that you might make an extreme move. I heard that you had an outstanding performance in the Bei'an County Exam, and now that I see you safe and sound, I feel relieved. Please, sit down."

Ning Jing gently placed the back basket on the ground and sat down next to Lin Shuzhi.

Lin Xueqing brought tea, poured a cup for both Ning Jing and Lin Shuzhi and then sat down in the room. She said, "Brother Ning, you have no idea how worried father was about you! He had my elder brothers keep an eye out for you all this time!"

At the age of eighteen, Lin Shuzhi had made a name for himself by performing exceptionally well in the Imperial Examination. The Former Emperor of Qian Country highly praised him as a talented genius.

Everyone expected a bright future for him. But to everyone's surprise, Lin Shuzhi resigned from his position in the capital after just three days and founded Qianshan Academy in Pingbei City.

Qian Country's northern region used to suffer from a harsh climate and infertile land, which resulted in fewer and less talented scholars than the wealthy southern region.

Qianshan Academy cultivated many impoverished students from the north, and supplied the court with many talents.

Most notably, Lin Shuzhi's twin sons were both highly accomplished, becoming the Top Scholar in Civil Examinations and the Martial Arts Champion in the same year. It became a well-known story. Now, one son is a civil official, and the other is a military commander, both with promising futures.

Lin Shuzhi's wife passed away from illness many years ago, and now only his youngest daughter, Lin Xueqing, stayed with him at Qianshan Academy. Many aspiring scholars wished to become Lin Shuzhi's disciples, not only for his knowledge but also to build connections with his sons and students to secure a bright future.

However, Lin Shuzhi never accepted any disciples publicly nor recommended any students from the academy to the government.

Lin Shuzhi did accept a disciple in secret, though, it was just not common knowledge.

Seeing that Ning Jing still didn't say anything, Lin Xueqing sighed, "Brother

Ning, don't dwell on the past too much. You wanted to participate in the Imperial Examination three years ago but missed the opportunity because your mother fell critically ill. It's not too late now. I know you never wanted to become a wealthy businessman. You want to prove yourself like my father, become a top scholar, and then live the life you desire. Your wish will soon come true!"

Ning Jing finally spoke, uttering just two words, "Thank you."

Lin Xueqing frowned and looked at Lin Shuzhi, but Lin Shuzhi shook his head, "Let's not talk about the past. You should rest well today for tomorrow's exam.

I'll talk to you in more detail after the exams are over in three days."

Lin Xueqing immediately said, "Father, let Jing... Brother Ning stay at the academy! What if those heartless people from the Ning Family hurt him when he's alone outside?"

"Don't talk nonsense." Lin Shuzhi looked serious and asked Ning Jing, "If you're willing, you can stay here, and I'll have someone arrange a place for you. With your outstanding performance in the Bei'an County Exam, you have a place at the academy. If you don't want to, I won't force you."

Ning Jing nodded, and Lin Xueqing's face lit up with joy, "Brother Ning, why don't you stay in the courtyard that my eldest brother used to live in?"

However, Ning Jing had already stood up, bowed to Lin Shuzhi, and said, "Thank you for your concern, Master. I have something to attend to today, so

I'll take my leave."

Lin Xueqing was stunned, "Brother Ning, you..."

But Ning Jing had already picked up the back basket from the floor, put it on his back, and walked out of the room.

"Brother Ning!" Lin Xueqing wanted to chase after him, but Lin Shuzhi stopped her.

The father and daughter stood at the door, watching Ning Jing's retreating figure.

Lin Xueqing couldn't understand, "Father, Ning Jing has no relatives now, and you were always inquiring about him before. Now that he's here, why don't you let him stay? He must be very lonely and without anyone to care for him."

Lin Shuzhi shook his head, "Haven't you heard? He used Crown Prince Bei Jingwang's token to participate in the Court Examination at Bei'an County, otherwise, we wouldn't see him today."

Lin Xueqing shook her head, "Ning Jing is proud by nature. I don't believe that he would curry favor with the powerful for his future. The fact that he took Crown Prince Bei Jingwang's token must be for reasons unknown to us. There are many rumors spreading in the academy, and if I hear anyone spreading them, I'll kick them out!"

Lin Shuzhi's expression was displeased, "Am I the dean of the academy, or are you the dean?"

Lin Xueqing hugged Lin Shuzhi's arm and shook it, "Father!"

"He's not the original Ning Jing anymore." Lin Shuzhi looked in the direction Ning Jing had left, and sighed again.

"He was cold today, but Father, you wouldn't be upset because of that, would you?" Lin Xueqing asked.

Lin Shuzhi shook his head, "I'm not upset. I just suddenly can't see through that child, and I don't know what he's trying to do."

"Of course, it's to become a Top Scholar. After that, he would not become an official, but rather travel around the world. Ning Jing had told me about this, and I even begged him to take me with him, but he refused, saying that if he took me away, my father and brother would beat him. It's a pity that I am a girl and cannot participate in the Civil Examinations; otherwise, I would compete with Ning Jing!" Lin Xueqing was somewhat regretful.

Lin Shuzhi teased his daughter with a smile, "You can participate in the Military Exam, and I won't stop you."

Lin Xueqing pouted, "I'm not like Second Brother, who's as strong as a bull."

Seeing that Lin Shuzhi returned to his reading, Lin Xueqing brought up Ning Jing again, "At the very least, we should know where Ning Jing is staying, right? What if he disappears after the exam!"

"He's grown up, let him be. If he needs our help, he'll speak up." Lin Shuzhi shook his head.

Lin Xueqing also shook her head, "He clearly doesn't want to have anything to do with me, he even forgot about the gift he promised me, although it doesn't really matter."

Lin Shuzhi read his book, and Lin Xueqing said she would go to the capital city during the New Year to find her eldest brother. By then, if Ning Jing had become a Top Scholar, she would be able to see him riding through the streets on a horse.

After a while, someone rushed in, "Dean, something bad has happened!" "What happened?" Lin Xueqing quickly got up and went out to ask.

"That Mr. Ning! People from the Ning Family in Xunyang City came looking for him, saying his father was gravely ill and begging him to come home for a last look! A group of people are kneeling at the entrance of the academy and refusing to get up!" The person said loudly.

Lin Xueqing frowned, and Lin Shuzhi closed the book in his hand and stood up, his face solemn as he walked outside, "Go and inform the Government Office that someone is causing trouble at the academy!"

The person hurriedly left.

“Father, the Ning Family is too hateful! Isn’t this kidnapping Ning Jing? He has an exam tomorrow, and by forcing him to go back now, it’s clearly intentional! They’re even making a scene in public. If he doesn’t go back to Xunyang City, he’ll be known as unfilial! Even if he passes the exam in the future, people will criticize him! What a sinister heart the people of the Ning family have!” Lin Xueqing’s expression was furious.

Lin Shuzhi arrived at the entrance of the academy and stopped, “We can’t interfere in this matter, it’s up to him to handle it.”

“What can he do? Father, you must help Ning Jing, he’s already suffered enough!” Lin Xueqing said.

Lin Shuzhi sighed, “When forced to this point, he has to make a stand, otherwise, the Ning family won’t give up. If only your second brother were here, he could beat them up today.”

There was a crowd gathered at the entrance of Qianshan Academy. Two old people, two middle-aged men, and two young men were kneeling on the ground, all claiming to be from the Ning Family in Xunyang City and looking for their Seventh Young Master.

The eldest of the old men was crying and his nose was running, “Seventh Young Master, when we expelled you from the family back then, the old master was forced to do so, it was all to protect you! The old master is seriously ill and has been holding on, hoping to see Seventh Young Master one last time. If Seventh Young Master doesn’t return, the old master won’t be able to rest in peace!”

The crowd was abuzz with people criticizing Ning Jing for his lack of filial piety.

Ning Jing carried a back basket and was surrounded by people in the center. He could feel something moving inside the basket, knowing that the child couldn’t hold back any longer. He spoke in front of everyone, “You were sent by Ning Yao, right? I just received a letter from home saying that my father is in good health and his greatest wish is for me to bring honor to our ancestors. He told me not to be distracted and to beware of Ning Yao’s attempts to harm me. Ning Yao has controlled the Ning family and sent assassins after me several times. Now you guys are here to ruin my future. What a great plan!” At this, the whole scene was shocked!

The kneeling Ning family members were dumbfounded.

After speaking, Ning Jing walked around them, passed through the crowd, and left with his head held high.

In the uninhabited forest, Ning Jing put down the back basket, opened the lid, and saw the child named Zhengzheng looking at him with tears in his eyes and reaching out a small hand, “Uncle...”

“I’m sorry.” Ning Jing hugged Zhengzheng out, gently patting his back to comfort him. After a while, Zhengzheng clung to his neck and didn’t let go, unwilling to return to the basket.

Just as Ning Jing was about to carry Zhengzheng down the mountain, his eyes suddenly narrowed.

A dark shadow flashed by, and two masked men with knives blocked their way, “Hand over that child!”

Ning Jing’s eyes flashed with impatience, and holding Zhengzheng’s head to his chest, he coldly uttered two words, “Seek death..”

Chapter 78: 078. Ning Jing died

After dealing with the two kidnappers in a few moves, Ning Jing carried Zhengzheng and took a detour to avoid people. After walking hurriedly through several alleys, he returned to his and Su Liang’s home in Pingbei City through the back door.

As soon as Zhengzheng was put down, he ran forward with his short legs, and Ning Jing followed behind carrying the basket.

“Aunt! Aunt!”

Hearing Zhengzheng’s voice, Su Liang came out of the kitchen, smiling lightly as she bent over to pick him up and rubbed his little head. “You’re back just in time.” She was about to finish cooking their lunch.

Su Liang told Ning Jing to take Zhengzheng away first, and she would finish cooking. However, Zhengzheng became cranky after being in the basket for too long and did not want to be held by Ning Jing anymore.

“What happened?” Su Liang noticed a small red dot on Ning Jing’s outer garment, which seemed to be a bloodstain.

Ning Jing placed the badge he received from Qianshan Academy on the table in the courtyard and went to the kitchen to start the fire.

“I met many people today.” Ning Jing said.

Su Liang held Zhengzheng in one arm and stirred the soup in the pot with the other. “Were you intercepted by the kidnappers halfway, or did Ning Yao send someone to lie in wait at the academy, inviting you to ‘go home’?”

She had deliberately let Ning Jing keep a low profile before, just so they could have some peaceful days.

Ning Yao had tried several times to get rid of Ning Jing but ended up failing. However, he would never tolerate Ning Jing’s continued participation in the imperial examination and would certainly not want to see him excel.

Therefore, he would never give up on killing Ning Jing and would only intensify his efforts.

In addition, the wealthy Xiao Family of Pingbei City was related to the Li family by marriage. Madam Xiao was Third Master Li’s legitimate sister and his accomplice in the kidnapping of the young master of the Wan Family.

When they entered the city, they found that the guards had been bought off and were waiting for Ning Jing to arrive, the Xiao Family was likely behind it. Knowing that Ning Jing would appear at Qianshan Academy today, Madam Xiao would certainly not sit idly by.

“Both possibilities are true.” Ning Jing confirmed Su Liang’s guesses. “There were also people arranged by Yang Yu. She prepared a mansion for you.”

Su Liang was a bit surprised. “Had we known earlier, we wouldn’t have bought our own mansion. But since we have, let’s not bother her for now.”

“Yonglong Embroidery Workshop. I said you would go there tomorrow.” Ning Jing said.

Su Liang thought for a moment and nodded. “That’s fine. Maybe this place will be exposed soon, and we’ll need to move. Tomorrow, when you go to the exam, I’ll go to the embroidery workshop to say hello.”

The owner of this mansion registered with the government office was Su Liang, and they could not use a fake name.

And this name would naturally be found by some “intentional people.”

However, Su Liang only felt that there would be more trouble, she was not afraid. Therefore, she had no intention of moving to the place arranged for them by Yang Yu for the time being.

When the meal was ready, Su Liang fed Zhengzheng and asked him what he had seen today.

Zhengzheng said, “Uncle Ning... Jing Brother!”

Su Liang raised an eyebrow and looked at Ning Jing. “Who called you Jing Brother?”

Those who would call him that were either children or young ladies.

Before Ning Jing could explain, Su Liang seemed to have an idea. “Don’t tell me,

Ning Yao sent a woman over, claiming to be your old lover?”

Zhengzheng said another sentence, “Ning Senior Brother!” It was what he heard while hiding in the basket.

Su Liang wondered who would call Ning Jing senior brother.

Ning Jing’s face was calm. “Ning Yao sent someone to kneel at the gate of the academy, saying that the head of the Ning Family was seriously ill and wanted to see me one last time.”

Su Liang snorted, “Moral kidnapping, trying to force you to give up the imperial examination and cut off your future.”

This tactic was undoubtedly sinister and vicious, and quite offensive. One had to be careful not to fall for it.

“I said that the head of the Ning Family had sent me a message, telling me that he was fine and to be careful of Ning Yao.” Ning Jing said.

Su Liang nodded, “Since they can’t provide evidence that someone is seriously ill, you can say that you know the person is fine. After all, the person is alive and won’t appear here. By the way, who

calls you Ning Senior Brother?” Ning Jing’s thin lips opened slightly. “Ning Jing’s junior sister.” Su Liang blinked her eyes.

Was this the start of an honest conversation about a certain matter?

Su Liang had known for a long time that the man in front of her was not the real seventh son of the Ning Family in Xunyang, but an imposter disguised as the fugitive rebel prince Gu.

Although she didn’t know how he managed to disguise himself as Ning Jing without being discovered.

As for this matter, they tacitly understood each other but had never talked about it.

“Ning Jing is dead.” Ning Jing said straightforwardly.

Su Liang was not surprised by the news, but it still felt strange to hear. “Please tell me more.”

“He once trusted Ning Yao most, but was framed by him. His mother died of illness, his father was unkind, and his siblings were all hypocritical and treacherous, trying to put him to death. He was poisoned with an incurable toxin and chose to end his life, not wanting to continue living worse than death.” Ning Jing recounted.

Su Liang sighed.

“I saved Ning Jing by chance five years ago, and when we parted, he said that he would repay me and find me to play chess when he went to the capital city. He decided to die, but didn’t want to die in the Ning Family. He wanted to find me but couldn’t, so he found Nian Jincheng. By that time, the Gu Family had already met with disaster, and I was being hunted down everywhere. Ning Jing paid heavily for a man from the rivers and lakes to cut off his face after he died and make it into a mask, and asked Nian Jincheng to deliver it to me.”

Su Liang stared at Ning Jing’s face in amazement. She thought he knew the Disguise Technique, but it turned out he was wearing a human skin mask?!

“There was also a letter. In it, he said goodbye to me and wrote about many unfulfilled wishes.” Ning Jing said.

Su Liang blurted out, “Taking the imperial examination was his wish, not yours. ”

Ning Jing nodded slightly. “He was a secret disciple of Lin Shuzhi, the dean of Qianshan Academy. He wanted to follow Lin Shuzhi’s footsteps, becoming a top scholar to prove himself, but not becoming an official and traveling the world.’

Yet the cruel reality had shattered his youthful dreams and left nothing behind.

At the time, Nian Jincheng had a clear idea that Ning Jing was an imposter when he went to Su Village. Nian Jincheng was directly involved in that matter.

But someone else was watching them in secret at the time, and if Nian Jincheng hadn’t gone, someone else would have gone, causing real trouble.

“Will that Jianghu person who made the human skin mask betray you?” Su Liang asked.

Ning Jing shook his head, “That person is sinister and evil. I informed Nian Jincheng to kill him and seal his mouth after the matter is done. No one knows about it except for you, me, Nian Jincheng, and Uncle Liang.”

“Uncle Liang...” Su Liang almost forgot about that old man who looked at her with great displeasure.

“He can be trusted,” Ning Jing said.

Su Liang asked again, “Did Ning Jing ask you in his last words to fulfill his wish for him?”

Ning Jing shook his head, “He only wanted to die at the time and learned about the Gu Family’s trouble. He just wanted to give me his identity to repay my kindness. He wrote about many things in his letter, but didn’t ask me to do anything. Before meeting Xing Yusheng, I never thought about taking the Imperial examination for him. He also said that he would never see the girl he planned to propose to after he became Top Scholar.”

Su Liang pondered, “Lin Shuzhi’s disciple... Zhengzheng said someone called you Ning senior brother, is it Lin Shuzhi’s daughter? Is she the person that Ning Jing mentioned in his letter?”

Ning Jing nodded and then shook his head, “He didn’t say explicitly, perhaps.”

“So, you met Miss Lin and Lin Shuzhi in the academy today, and they didn’t notice any changes in you?” Su Liang asked.

“If there are changes, it’s normal,” Ning Jing said.

“True,” Su Liang nodded, “It seems that you have passed the test. If Ning Jing has a spirit in heaven, he would be happy to see you fulfill his wish, become the Top Scholar, infuriate those scums in the Ning Family, and then disappear, making the world think that the Seventh Young Master of Xunyang’s Ning Family went on a carefree journey. But what if Miss Lin wants to marry you?” Ning Jing shook his head, “Although Lin Shuzhi cares about Ning Jing, he doesn’t want his only daughter to be with Ning Jing.”

“Parents’ hearts,” Su Liang expressed her understanding, “As a fake Ning Jing, you are constantly in trouble and can’t have peace. How can they rest assured to marry their daughter to you? When you met today, did you think that Miss Lin liked Ning Jing?”

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

“Then stay away from her, so as not to cause unnecessary misunderstandings,” Su Liang said seriously.

It wouldn’t be a problem to pursue someone if he resumed his original identity. But with a fake identity, it was a misunderstanding from the beginning, so it would be best not to have any emotional entanglements.

However, Su Liang felt that she was stating the obvious, as that kind of melodramatic plotline was impossible to happen with him.

Zhengzheng seemed to be dissatisfied that Su Liang and Ning Jing only talked and ignored him. He waved his little hand, shouting “aunt” and “Uncle Ning.”

Ning Jing reached out to hug Zhengzheng, but he turned his head and hugged Su Liang instead, indicating that he was still angry and wouldn’t let him hug him!

“You don’t have to worry about Zhengzheng clinging to you during the exam tomorrow.” Su Liang said, “If Cheng Yun is reliable, Zhengzheng’s mother should arrive soon.”

Qianshan Academy.

After Ning Jing left, the six members of the Ning Family kept claiming that their Family Head was indeed critically ill, and the eldest son Ning Yao had no intention of harming Ning Jing.

The former claim couldn’t be verified.

As for the latter, the onlookers would weigh it in their hearts.

Ning Jing, as the only legitimate son of the Ning Family, was expelled from the family due to his mistakes, and the illegitimate eldest son Ning Yao took over power.

Furthermore, from the perspective of bloodline, Ning Yao did not even count as a descendant of the Ning Family. The only rightful heir of the Ning Family was Ning Jing. Who would believe that Ning Yao had no intention of harming him?

Besides, although filial piety is the most important thing, scholars know best the difficulties of the Imperial examination. Ning Jing’s Provincial Exam was tomorrow, and if he passed, he would become a scholar and bring glory to his family. How could it be that the Ning Family showed up today, insisting that he return home immediately?

If they put themselves in the same situation, even if it meant not telling the truth, many scholars would think that even if their parents were seriously ill, they would keep it a secret from them, at least until the exam was over. This is what “Parents’ love for their children goes deep and far.”

Speaking unpleasantly, since the Ning Family’s Head is about to die, what difference does it make whether he sees Ning Jing or not? Are they trying to have Ning Jing return to inherit the family’s business? Then why drive him away in the first place?

Although it was rumored that Ning Jing was convicted of a serious mistake with conclusive evidence, who really knew what happened in the big family’s internal affairs? If the Ning Family didn’t say it themselves, how would outsiders know whether the tribute tea was burned by Ning Jing or Ning Yao?

If Ning Jing was really that important to the Ning Family Head, the one who would be convicted and driven out wouldn’t have been him in the first place!

No matter how pitiful the people sent by the Ning Family looked, it was not very useful because all the scholars who had read for many years would not believe them once they calmed down.

The Ning Family asked to see the dean of the academy, Lin Shuzhi, hoping he would help persuade Ning Jing to return home.

Lin Shuzhi did not let them in, but sent a message telling them to wait outside the academy's gate.

In the end, when the six people waited for Lin Shuzhi to show up, the government soldiers also arrived.

The Imperial examination is a major event that each local Government Office attaches great importance to. When Lin Shuzhi sent someone to report a crime, saying that outsiders were causing trouble at Qianshan Academy and harassing students, they immediately sent someone to handle it.

Lin Shuzhi said seriously to the government official, "It is those six people who claim to be from Xunyang's Ning Family. I don't know their real identity or their purpose. This place is a quiet place for the academy, and tomorrow is the day of the Provincial Exam. They are causing trouble today and refuse to leave. I suspect they intend to disrupt the students' minds for ulterior motives. I implore you to handle this matter seriously."

The Ning Family members were dumbfounded and hurriedly explained.

However, the government soldiers naturally wouldn't listen and quickly arrested them all and escorted them away, assuring Lin Shuzhi that they would be severely punished.

"Dad, you forgot to give the pen to Ning Jing," Lin Xueqing reminded Lin Shuzhi.

Lin Shuzhi shook his head, "Let's talk about it in three days." "What if he's gone after the exam?" Lin Xueqing asked.

"Bring me a rope," Lin Shuzhi said.

Lin Xueqing was stunned, "Ah? What do you need a rope for?"

"By then, I will be waiting at the Examination Hall's gate. As soon as he comes out, I will tie him up and take him back. Are you satisfied?" Lin Shuzhi snorted.

Lin Xueqing laughed out loud, "Great! A gentleman's word is his bond, I'll find a rope for my father right away!"

Seeing Lin Xueqing about to run away, Lin Shuzhi called her back, "Stop teasing. It's good to know that he's okay, let him be for everything else."

Lin Xueqing disagreed, "But after the Provincial Exam is over, it would be nice if Ning senior brother stays in the academy if he doesn't go to the capital. He might just not want to cause trouble for us. Dad, are you really not going to look for him, and leave him to be alone?"

Lin Shuzhi sighed deeply, "Forget it, I can't win against you. Go find a rope.."

Chapter 79: 079. Zhengzheng Leaves

Though she had been at odds with Ning Jing during the day, when it was time for bed, Zhengzheng was still obediently taken away by Ning Jing.

Early in the morning of October 15th, Su Liang got up, washed and didn't go for a run or practice martial arts. Instead, she stayed in the kitchen, busying herself with cooking for Ning Jing.

Aside from breakfast, she also needed to prepare lunch. On the first day of the exam, they wouldn't be released until the afternoon.

Su Liang had asked Ning Jing the night before what he wanted to eat. She considered making dishes, but they would be cold by the time he ate them, and it wouldn't be convenient. In the end, she decided to make stuffed pastries with meat and vegetarian fillings.

Apparently, in the past, some people cheated using the food they brought to the Provincial Exam, so afterward, inspections became very strict. Once caught, the consequences went beyond disqualification from the examination; there would even be jail time. Thus, very few people dared to risk cheating under such heavy punishment.

After breakfast, the sky just started to brighten, and Zhengzheng was still fast asleep.

Carrying the box of books that Su Liang had bought for him, Ning Jing left through the back door alone.

After taking a few steps, Ning Jing heard the door close and turned to look back, but Su Liang was already out of sight.

Ning Jing turned away and walked through the alley, in the direction of the Examination Hall in Pingbei City.

The early arriving examinees had already formed a long line and were being inspected one by one.

Ning Jing noticed someone staring at him but didn't pay attention to it.

When it was finally his turn, Lin Shuzhi was standing at the entrance of the Examination Hall. As he did for other examinees, he said a word of encouragement to Ning Jing without showing any special treatment.

"Thank you," Ning Jing responded with a slight nod.

Lin Shuzhi saw the several stuffed pastries in Ning Jing's box, and upon taking them out, their delicious smell wafted out and they were still warm.

He didn't know if Ning Jing bought them or if someone made them for him, but when he thought of Lin Xueqing, who had gotten up early to cook for Ning Jing, Lin Shuzhi gave a faint sigh.

Lin Xueqing wasn't good at cooking, but she enjoyed it. In the past, her two older brothers and Ning Jing praised her cooking no matter what she made.

However, things had changed.

Ning Jing carried his box of books into the Examination Hall, and Lin Shuzhi spotted someone lurking at the corner, anxiously peeking in this direction. He recalled the two men's corpses found near Qianshan Academy after Ning Jing left yesterday. Although he didn't think Ning Jing was the one responsible, he had a hunch it was related to him.

Lin Shuzhi cleared his thoughts and continued to encourage the next examinee with a gentle smile.

On the surface, everything was peaceful.

Just as Su Liang had sent Ning Jing off and returned to her room, she saw Zhengzheng's bewildered little face sitting on the bed. As soon as he saw her, his mouth turned down, and he began to cry.

Thinking about the child's experience of being abducted, Su Liang figured he must have called for someone and gotten scared when nobody answered.

Su Liang quickly went over, hugged Zhengzheng, and gently patted him to soothe him.

After a while, when there was no sound, she looked down only to see the little guy had fallen asleep again in her arms...

There was no time to practice martial arts or read when she had to take care of the child. Su Liang still had to go out today.

Unable to leave Zhengzheng at home or carry him in the basket as she did the day before, Su Liang had no choice but to disguise herself as a man, and they went out by carriage.

Inside the carriage sat the young master, Zhengzheng. There was plenty of space for him to play at will, and as long as he didn't leave, no one would discover him.

After all, some people in Pingbei City wanted to kidnap the child, and with Ning Jing absent, Su Liang didn't want to get into trouble.

The carriage stopped outside the Yonglong Embroidery Workshop. The manager who met with Ning Jing the day before noticed it right away, but Su Liang's disguise made it difficult for him to be certain.

Su Liang didn't get off the carriage. The manager came out and politely asked,

"What would you like to buy?"

Su Liang took out the jade token that Yang Yu had given her, showed it for a moment, and then quickly put it away.

Seeing the token, the manager instantly recognized that this "voting man" was Yang Yu's "most important friend" mentioned in the letter. He hurriedly invited Su Liang inside.

"I have some errands to run, so I won't come in today. Please get me the best cotton cloth," Su Liang said.

The manager understood, went back into the store, and soon returned with a roll of cotton cloth and the most expensive silk in the shop.

Su Liang took them and put them in the carriage.

As the curtain of the carriage swayed, the manager caught a glimpse of a little boy inside, and he hesitated for a moment.

Su Liang handed him a banknote.

Regaining his senses, the manager hastily took it.

Then, she drove the carriage away.

Zhengzheng pulled open the bag of cloth, inside lied the house key and a note of the house location given by Yang Yu to Su Liang.

Yang Yu knew Ning Jing was in trouble, so the house was registered under the Yang Family's name instead of using Ning Jing or Su Liang's names, but they could move in at any time.

When they passed by the examination hall, it was heavily guarded, and no idle people were allowed to approach.

Su Liang took a look and hurried the carriage back.

Once back home, Zhengzheng wanted to play on the swing one moment, stack building blocks the next, then thirsty, then hungry.

Su Liang finally experienced the difficulties Ning Jing had faced taking care of Zhengzheng before.

In the evening, the Examination Hall's gate opened, and the candidates poured out one by one with tired expressions.

Ning Jing walked in the front and left as soon as the door opened.

Lin Shuzhi, who was waiting outside, wanted to say something to him but found that Ning Jing disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Some people who had been watching nearby all day felt as if they had just seen a ghost, Ning Jing seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Kids always forget grudges easily.

When Ning Jing entered the house with his book box, Zhengzheng excitedly ran over to him, "Uncle Ning!"

Ning Jing put down the book box, picked up Zhengzheng, and saw that he was wearing new clothes, which Su Liang must have bought today.

Su Liang, with an apron tied around her waist, poked her head out of the kitchen and casually asked, "Tired?"

"Tired." Ning Jing's answer surprised her.

But then Ning Jing continued, "Couldn't come out early, it was suffocating inside."

Su Liang: ...So the part he found tiring wasn't that the questions were too difficult or that he had no confidence, but that he wasn't allowed to turn in his answers early and felt annoyed?

"Did anyone follow you?" Su Liang asked again.

Ning Jing shook his head, "Shook them off."

He wanted to take a bath first, and Su Liang had just heated the water.

By the time Ning Jing finished bathing and changed into clean clothes, the sky had already darkened.

Lanterns were lit under the eaves, casting a hazy glow.

In the courtyard, the little swing gently swayed in the night breeze, and Zhengzheng's giggles came from the small living room.

Su Liang looked up to see Ning Jing, her eyes filled with amazement.

His face was still the same, cold and indifferent. His ink-black hair hung at the back of his head, and he wore the black gown that Su Liang had bought for him a few days ago. It was a bit large, which added a sense of elegance and detachment.

“Uncle Ning!” Zhengzheng stood on a chair and waved his little hand at Ning Jing.

On the table was only the egg custard that Zhengzheng was eating; the rest of the dishes were still warming on the stove.

When Ning Jing brought the dishes over, they began eating.

Su Liang was very curious about the Imperial examination. Ning Jing had previously given her a copy of the questions from the Court Examination.

Now, as Su Liang asked, Ning Jing talked about today’s exam questions.

For each question, Su Liang would ponder for a moment, share her insights, and then inquire about Ning Jing’s answers.

Some of the answers were quite different.

“It seems I would definitely fail if I took the Imperial examination,” Su Liang said.

“You’re right,” Ning Jing succinctly expressed that, although he was there for the exam, he agreed more with Su Liang’s opinions.

“You’re right!” Zhengzheng grinned at Ning Jing.

Su Liang then asked Zhengzheng who he wanted to sleep with tonight.

Zhengzheng looked at Ning Jing, then at Su Liang, and answered crisply, “With Uncle Ning! And Auntie! Together!”

Su Liang couldn’t help but smile, “Being greedy like that is not good. You can only choose one. Why don’t you sleep with me? Your Uncle Ning said he’s tired today.”

Time quickly came to October 17, the final day of the Provincial Exam.

There were noticeably fewer candidates taking the exam on this day compared to the first day. Some of them, discouraged by their poor performance during the previous two days, chose not to continue.

As Ning Jing entered, he saw Lin Shuzhi again.

This time, Lin Shuzhi spoke differently to Ning Jing, “Come to the academy after the exam today.” His voice was deliberately lowered.

Ning Jing glanced at Lin Shuzhi’s brow and nodded slightly in agreement.

At noon, the Provincial Exam officially came to an end.

The guards at the Examination Hall were withdrawn, and many people gathered outside.

Lin Shuzhi didn’t do as he told Lin Xueqing – waiting for Ning Jing to tie him up with a rope. He also stopped Lin Xueqing from coming to Ning Jing.

Ning Jing planned to return home first before going to Qianshan Academy.

A tall figure approached through the crowd and grabbed Ning Jing's wrist!

Ning Jing had sensed this early on but didn't avoid it, as he didn't want to use force here.

The man was in his thirties, with average looks and a waist sword, resembling a guard from a wealthy family.

"Where's my son?" The man's voice was low.

The crowd was noisy, but Ning Jing heard him clearly. He looked in the direction the man came from and saw a carriage parked outside the crowd.

Ning Jing easily shook off the man's hand. The man's eyes flashed with surprise as Ning Jing said, "Follow me."

Ning Jing walked lightly and swiftly, with the man following at a distance.

Seeing Ning Jing enter a mansion through the back door and disappear, the man hesitated for a moment before leaving in haste.

As Ning Jing came to the gate of the courtyard, he saw Su Liang sitting in his previous spot, and Zhengzheng sitting on the stone table. They were playing with building blocks, forming the shape of a large tree.

Zhengzheng turned his head, saw Ning Jing, and called out to him cheerfully,

"Uncle INing!" HIS tone was upDeat.

Ning Jing nodded slightly and said, "Zhengzheng, you're so talented."

Zhengzheng happily clapped his hands and told Su Liang, "Auntie, you're so talented too!"

Su Liang looked at Ning Jing, returning his previous words, "Go study." Ning Jing: ..

As Ning Jing came out after washing, Su Liang stood up, "It seems like someone is knocking on the door."

"The Wan Family has come." Ning Jing said, touching the fluffy ball on Zhengzheng's little red hat.

Su Liang sighed as she saw the child climbing all over Ning Jing's body, "I'll go open the door."

Su Liang opened the door to see a man standing outside, with an understated yet luxurious carriage parked beside him.

"Are you Miss Su Liang?" The man asked with a bow.

Su Liang nodded, and the curtain of the carriage was lifted. A young and beautiful woman looked out, her eyes rimmed with red, "Is my child...?"

"Please come in." Su Liang opened the door wide, allowing the carriage to enter, and closed it again.

Turning back, the man was already helping the woman off the carriage.

"I am Wan Hui. Master Cheng Yun said that Miss Su and Master Ning saved my son and asked us to come to Pingbei City to fetch him. Is my child here?" The woman's expression was anxious.

Su Liang nodded, "Miss Wan, Zhengzheng is fine. Please follow me."

Seeing their interlocked fingers, this man was likely Wan Hui's husband, whom she had brought into the family.

As Su Liang led Wan Hui and her husband to the courtyard gate, they could hear the sound of a child's laughter.

Wan Hui pushed her husband away, stepped past Su Liang, and ran into the yard. She saw the small figure and called out, "Zhengzheng!"

Zhengzheng heard her and looked up, still holding two small building blocks in his hands. He stared at Wan Hui blankly, not reacting for a moment.

Wan Hui rushed over and embraced Zhengzheng, her tears breaking through, "My child..."

The man stepped forward, embracing the mother and child, and let out a long sigh, "It's all right now."

"Mom?" Zhengzheng reacted, dropped the building blocks, his little face excited, calling out to his mom, and then calling out to his dad.

The family of three reunited, Ning Jing walked over to Su Liang, and the two stood quietly, not saying a word.

After a while, the emotionally calmed Wan Hui and her husband sat in the small hall, and Su Liang poured them tea.

Wan Hui was only 25 years old this year, with only one child, Zhengzheng, who resembled his mother in looks.

Wan Hui had no makeup on, and her haggard appearance could not hide her beauty. It was said that Third Master Li, who was smitten with beautiful women, fell in love with Miss Wan at first sight, and used all his means to get her.

Unfortunately, after marrying her, the scumbag lost interest in her and went on to pursue other beauties.

"Auntie! Uncle Ning!" Zhengzheng grabbed Wan Hui's hand, affectionately calling out to Su Liang and Ning Jing, as if sharing his joy of finding his mother with them.

Wan Hui saw her son being raised plump and dressed exquisitely cute, seemingly as if nothing had happened, even more lively than before. She knew that Cheng Yun's words were true, Su Liang and Ning Jing had taken great care of Zhengzheng.

Wan Hui handed Zhengzheng to her husband, and was about to kneel down but was stopped by Su Liang, "There's no need for that."

"I really don't know what to say..." Wan Hui's eyes reddened as she tightly held Su Liang's hand.

"We just happened to come across him, maybe we're fated with Zhengzheng!" Su Liang smiled.

Wan Hui nodded heavily, "The two of you must be the noble people in my son's life! If there's anything I can do for you both, please don't hesitate to ask." Su Liang looked at Ning Jing, who had no intention of speaking.

So, Su Liang said, "We don't need Miss Wan to bother with anything, just please take good care of Zhengzheng in the future and don't lose him again."

"I won't. If that Li bastard dares to take my son again, I'll fight him to the death!" Wan Hui gritted her teeth when mentioning Third Master Li.

Listening to her, Su Liang felt that Zhengzheng's background might not be what they had thought.

Excited to see his parents, Zhengzheng wanted to play with Ning Jing after a while, completely unaware that they would soon be parting.

Although Wan Hui repeatedly offered her gratitude, Su Liang politely declined. Initially, they had thought of asking the Wan Family to deal with Ning Yao, but now that they had feelings for Zhengzheng, Su Liang only wished for the family of three to be safe and sound.

Wan Hui took the initiative to mention that if Ning Jing needed help from the Wan Family, she would definitely do her best.

"No need." Ning Jing spoke for the first time, his expression indifferent.

"We want to take our child home as soon as possible and find a way to make the Li family pay." Wan Hui sighed softly, "If there's anything I can do for both of you in the future, I'll do my best."

"Alright." Su Liang nodded.

She packed all the clothes she had bought for Zhengzheng during these days, filling a large suitcase, along with a pile of building blocks. The little wooden puppet Ning Jing had made for Zhengzheng was proudly shown to his parents.

When Wan Hui carried Zhengzheng out of the door, she noticed a cute little swing in the courtyard, obviously made for children to play with.

She was deeply moved.

"Zhengzheng, say goodbye to Uncle Ning and Auntie Su." Wan Hui instructed her son.

"Goodbye!" Zhengzheng said with a grin.

However, when Wan Hui was about to carry Zhengzheng out of the courtyard, he realized that Ning Jing and Su Liang were still standing in the same place, and he suddenly panicked, "Uncle Ning! Auntie! I want my Auntie!"

Wan Hui tried to comfort Zhengzheng, promising to take him home, but he simply wouldn't listen and began to cry.

Ning Jing walked over, took Zhengzheng aside, and said something. In the end, with sobs and reluctance, Zhengzheng was taken away by his parents.

"What did you say to him?" Su Liang was curious.

Ning Jing shook his head, "Secret."

Su Liang:...

After the child left, the courtyard suddenly became quiet, and Su Liang felt a little unused to it. She had wanted to accompany them, but eventually, they had to part, and the child should return to his parents.

"I'm going to Qianshan Academy, you're coming too." Ning Jing called to Su Liang.

"What are we going to do there? Why do I need to go too?" As Su Liang spoke, she got up and went back to her room to change her clothes.

Ning Jing's voice came from outside the door, "You wanted to know Lin

Xueqing's feelings for Ning Jing, didn't you? You should see for yourself.."

Chapter 80: 080. What's going on with Brother Ning?

Qianshan Academy.

Lin Xueqing looked out the door for the nth time, "Why hasn't Brother Ning come yet? Has he already left Pingbei City?"

"The results will be announced in five days." Lin Shuzhi believed that Ning Jing would not leave for the time being.

"But we don't know where he lives, and we can't find him if he doesn't come." Lin Xueqing frowned.

Lin Shuzhi shook his head, "Then don't look for him."

"Father, you clearly agreed to invite Brother Ning to stay at the academy before!" Lin Xueqing said.

Lin Shuzhi sighed softly, "I did invite him, but whether he comes or not is not within our control."

Lin Xueqing leaned against the window, without saying another word.

Su Liang was dressed as a man and walked beside Ning Jing. Due to the difference in height, it looked like a young master accompanied by a young follower.

On the way up the mountain, they met many scholars who were walking down the mountain in groups.

Results would be announced five days later, and Qianshan Academy was on holiday during these days.

Again, they met the two scholars who had come from Bei'an County and had previously led Ning Jing.

Seeing Ning Jing, they came over to greet him, and one of them glanced at Su Liang several times, seemingly puzzled.

They asked Ning Jing if he would go to the academy after the results were announced, and Ning Jing said he had not decided yet.

"If we pass, we'll stay here, and then go to the capital for the next exam after the new year. If we don't pass, we'll go back home." one scholar said.

Ning Jing nodded slightly, "I hope there will be good results."

The two had long discovered that although Ning Jing was cold, he was not arrogant. They had even defended him in Qianshan Academy, but no one listened.

After a few brief exchanges, they parted ways.

One of them looked back frequently, "The young man next to Brother Ning, I seem to have seen him somewhere."

"I haven't seen him. Must be his follower." the other one said.

The one who spoke first suddenly slapped his forehead, "I remember now! Isn't that Ning Jing's sworn sister? It's Miss Sul"

As the two of them looked back again, Ning Jing and Su Liang had already turned the corner and were out of sight.

Su Liang was also talking about them.

"How come that guy who was ranked first with you isn't with them?" Su Liang asked. There were only three scholars who came from the same place to study at Qianshan Academy, and they should have supported each other.

Ning Jing shook his head, "I don't know."

It was just a casual question from Su Liang, and she immediately put it out of her mind.

The two arrived at the entrance of Qianshan Academy. As soon as the gatekeeper heard it was Ning Jing, he immediately let them in.

As Su Liang walked along, she looked at the ancient and elegant academy and could hear people reciting loudly.

There were three tall cypress trees outside Lin Shuzhi's courtyard. Su Liang heard the cry of the crows but couldn't find them in the trees. She followed Ning Jing into the courtyard.

“Brother Ning!”

Su Liang looked towards the sound and saw a bright and cheerful girl in a light blue dress running out the door. Her long skirt fluttered in the wind. This must be Lin Xueqing, who had called Ning Jing “Jing Gege” and then changed to “Brother Ning”.

Lin Xueqing wanted to grab Ning Jing’s hand but hesitated and withdrew her hand. She smiled and said, “I knew that once my father spoke, Brother Ning would surely come.”

As she finished speaking, Lin Xueqing’s gaze fell on Su Liang.

Perhaps because of Su Liang’s attire and the fact that she didn’t stand behind Ning Jing, Lin Xueqing didn’t regard her as Ning Jing’s servant and curiously asked, “Is this gentleman Brother Ning’s friend?”

Su Liang nodded slightly, ‘Miss Lin.’”

Lin Xueqing, hearing Su Liang’s female voice, was surprised, “You dress up as a man so gracefully, I couldn’t even tell. When I dressed as a man, my brothers could tell I was a woman at a glance.”

Su Liang maintained a serious expression and bowed, “Greetings to you.”

Lin Xueqing returned the courtesy, her eyes shimmering, “You look so handsome, sir.”

As she finished speaking, she grabbed Su Liang’s hand and whispered in her ear, “I bet you must be Ning Jing’s confidante!”

Ning Jing by the side: ...

Su Liang: ...Fine, as soon as I entered, it was confirmed that Miss Lin had no romantic feelings for the real Ning Jing. What’s going on with her “my brother surprisingly brought my sister-in-law home, what a pleasant surprise” attitude?

Before coming here, Su Liang had thought that Ning Jing invited her because he was worried that Lin Xueqing might like the real Ning Jing. To avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, he wanted to pretend to be a couple with Su Liang.

But it turned out, there was no need at all.

Lin Xueqing looked at Su Liang expectantly, her eyes seemingly saying, “Hurry up and admit it, I’m just waiting to call you sister-in-law.” Su Liang coughed lightly, “Don’t misunderstand, we’re simply sworn siblings.”

Lin Xueqing was stunned, “Sworn siblings? Are you Su Liang?”

Su Liang nodded.

Lin Xueqing looked serious, “I asked the scholars from Bei’an County about Brother Ning. I know that he once pretended to marry a miss surnamed Su to save her, and then later clarified their relationship. I had wondered what kind of girl she would be, and I didn’t expect her to come to Pingbei City with Brother Ning. Miss Su, don’t you like Brother Ning?”

Su Liang raised her eyebrows, “Why would you ask that? Maybe he doesn’t like

“No way! Brother Ning once said that if he didn’t like a girl, he wouldn’t even bother talking to her.” Lin Xueqing said seriously, then pouted, “You don’t know, but Brother

Ning didn't even want to pay attention to me when he came here a few days ago. But he keeps you by his side, so he must like you!"

Su Liang felt a slight regret in her heart. Perhaps Lin Xueqing believed that the real Ning Jing only regarded her as a sister, but when the real Ning Jing said those words to her, could he have been hoping to tell Lin Xueqing after she came of age that he couldn't be bothered with other girls except her, ...?

Seeing Su Liang not speaking, Lin Xueqing assumed she guessed right and said, holding Su Liang's arm, "Brother Ning is now reticent and a bit dull, but he wasn't like this before. He has encountered too many things these past years, and his mood hasn't been good. You mustn't mind it."

Su Liang quickly explained, "You really misunderstood. We are just friends. He doesn't like me, nor do I like him. I don't have any family, and he doesn't either, so we became sworn siblings and took care of each other." Lin Xueqing frowned, looking at Ning Jing, "Brother Ning, is that true?"

Ning Jing nodded slightly, "Yes."

Lin Xueqing still seemed doubtful, when Lin Shuzhi's voice came from the room, "Xueqing, why don't you invite the guests in?"

"Oh." Lin Xueqing pulled Su Liang and walked forward, laughing again, "Even if you are just friends and siblings, I'm still happy. I've always worried that Senior Brother Ning was too lonely by himself. You don't know, when there was no news from him before, my father was even worried that he would commit suicide! How could that be possible?"

Su Liang sighed in her heart: Lin Shuzhi truly understood Zhen Ningjing. And

Zhen Ningjing could not possibly show his vulnerable side in front of Lin Xueqing. Therefore, the "Senior Brother Ning" in this junior sister's memory was not the same as the disciple in Lin Shuzhi's eyes.

As soon as they entered, Lin Shuzhi's gaze fell on Su Liang, carrying a hint of scrutiny.

Su Liang bowed and called him "Dean Lin."

"Since you are Ning Jing's sister, follow him and call me master." Lin Shuzhi observed Su Liang's clear eyes and graceful manner, knowing that this girl must be extraordinary.

Su Liang called him "master" and then asked with a smile, "If I want to study at Qianshan Academy, can I make an exception?"

Lin Shuzhi nodded, "As long as you come, I will teach you personally."

Lin Xueqing laughed and pulled Su Liang to sit down, "Dad, you're obviously using Miss Su to make Senior Brother Ning stay, right?"

Lin Shuzhi's mouth twitched slightly, "Xueqing, can you not always sabotage your father's plan?"

The father-daughter conversation allowed Su Liang to see their close and harmonious relationship while also revealing their candor.

“Dad thinks Big Brother is boring, Second Brother is impulsive, and now he’s fed up with my talkativeness.” Lin Xueqing pretended to be heartbroken, “I’ll follow Senior Brother Ning and Sister Su, and we’ll be three siblings.”

She then asked Su Liang’s age and learning that she was younger, changed her address to “Sister Su.”

“Su Liang is here for the first time, Xueqing, you take her out for a tour.” Lin Shuzhi spoke.

Lin Xueqing understood that he wanted to separate them and have a private conversation with Ning Jing, so she asked Su Liang if she wanted to go.

Su Liang nodded, and the two left hand in hand.

Lin Shuzhi watched their figures disappear at the entrance and then looked at Ning Jing and asked, “The relationship between you and Miss Su Liang is really just friendship?”

Ning Jing nodded slightly, “Yes.”

“What about Xueqing?” Lin Shuzhi asked this question straightforwardly.

After a moment of silence, Ning Jing said, “I have too many troubles, and I don’t want to harm her.”

Lin Shuzhi’s eyes tightened, and he fell silent.

As a father and master, he had long known that Zhen Ningjing was in love with Lin Xueqing. And Zhen Ningjing’s obsession with the Imperial examination was largely because Lin Xueqing had once said that she admired her father most. Therefore, Ning Jing wanted to imitate Lin Shuzhi.

During their hasty farewell, Zhen Ningjing told Lin Shuzhi that he would return after settling his family matters. He did not want to inherit the Ning Family business and would entrust his most trusted elder brother, Ning Yao, to manage it.

At that time, Lin Shuzhi felt that Zhen Ningjing was too naive. The matters of the Ning Family were not so simple. His existence made the identities of his half-brothers from different mothers very awkward and led to major conflicts of interest.

Lin Shuzhi solemnly reminded Zhen Ningjing not to be too trusting and even said directly that Ning Yao might not be trustworthy.

But at that time, Zhen Ningjing, who was anxious to go home and never doubted his elder brother who had been extremely fond of him since childhood, simply didn’t listen.

Ning Jing’s statement to Su Liang that “Lin Shuzhi doesn’t want his only daughter to marry Ning Jing” is not accurate.

Lin Shuzhi asked Lin Xueqing to call him Senior Brother that day just because he didn’t know whether his long-lost disciple had changed or what his plans for the future were.

If Ning Jing wanted to return to Xunyang City to fight for property, Lin Shuzhi would support him, but he would not agree to marry his daughter to him until everything settled. Because he didn’t want to put his daughter in danger.

Lin Shuzhi's concern and help for Ning Jing is based on the relationship between master and disciple.

His reluctance to marry Lin Xueqing to Ning Jing is a parental heart.

Now face-to-face, Ning Jing's words did not deny that "he" had once liked Lin Xueqing, but also made it clear that in the future they would only be siblings. He would not give up his hatred for Lin Xueqing's sake.

If Ning Jing denied it, saying that he had always treated Lin Xueqing as a sister, Lin Shuzhi would immediately find out that there was something wrong with this disciple...

Ning Jing could not expose his true identity, so as not to bring major trouble to the Lin Family.

Moreover, in his last letter, Zhen Ningjing said that he hoped those who cared for him would think that he was still alive, just far away.

Lin Shuzhi sighed deeply, "It seems that you want to go back to the Ning Family."

Ning Jing shook his head, his expression calm as he said, "That gloomy place has nothing worth returning to. I just want it to disappear."

Lin Shuzhi's eyes darkened, "The day you left, two male corpses were found near the academy. Do you know about this?"

Ning Jing nodded and admitted, "I did it."

Lin Shuzhi's expression finally changed, "Why? Were those people sent by Ning Yao to kill you?"

"No. They were from another enemy who indeed wanted to kill me." Ning Jing explained.

Lin Shuzhi was silent for a long time before sighing with a bitter smile, "Actually, as your master, I should be happy that you now have the ability to protect yourself and are no longer so softhearted. With so many people wanting to harm you, only in this way can you survive. Being ruthless is not wrong. However, I don't know what you have experienced in these years, but it must have been very hard, right? If you are willing to talk, I will accompany you for a drink."

"It's all in the past," Ning Jing shook his head slightly, "Master, don't worry, I'm fine."

"Really?" Lin Shuzhi sighed again and again, lowered his eyes and picked up the tea, "You look fine, but you can't laugh anymore."

After another silence, Lin Shuzhi got up, "You, Bo Yan, and Bo Jun planted trees in the back mountain. Go and have a look."

Ning Jing stood up, following Lin Shuzhi as they walked out.

As they walked out the door, Lin Shuzhi suddenly stopped and looked back, asking, "What was in the bag you were carrying last time? I saw it move, as if it were something alive."

Ning Jing answered truthfully, "A child."

Lin Shuzhi's forehead twitched, "You... swear to me right now that you won't do anything immoral!"

Ning Jing immediately swore and then explained to Lin Shuzhi that the child was rescued from thieves by him and Su Liang on their way to Pingbei City. The child's parents had been found, and they had picked up the child.

Lin Shuzhi held his forehead, "Why were you hiding him like that? What if the child had suffocated?"

Ning Jing said calmly, "Yes, it was my mistake."

Lin Shuzhi:... What's the use of such a good attitude towards admitting mistakes? It's like you still won't change next time!

The scenery on the back mountain of the Qianshan Academy is exceptionally beautiful.

Lin Xueqing took Su Liang on a tour of the academy's interior and this area as well.

"Sister Su, why don't you like Senior Brother Ning? Do you think he is not handsome? Or is his temperament too boring? I still think he must like you, but because you don't like him, he doesn't dare to confess, fearing that your rejection would make it difficult to even be friends." Lin Xueqing analyzed carefully.

To put an end to this topic that Lin Xueqing had been dwelling on, Su Liang said, "Actually, I liked him, but he rejected me."

Lin Xueqing's eyes widened, "Ah? Is that so? What's the matter with Senior Brother Ning?"