

M. Slaying 18

Chapter 18: The Bizarre Case of the Academy

It was nighttime. The moon hung high in the dark sky, and the wind howled through the air.

The South Mountain Academy was situated outside Yanjiao City. It was constructed next to the South Mountain, hence its name. Behind the academy, there was a small lake. It was serene and secluded, often frequented by young men and women in the past on summer nights. However, no one dared to approach this area now because someone had died there recently.

Yet, two scholars were visiting this place tonight.

As they approached the edge of the lake, a chilling breeze pierced through their clothes, causing an involuntary shiver.

"Brother Shao'an, why do we have to meet here? Isn't this... where Situ Yan committed suicide?"

As they approached the edge of the dark lake, the frail and skinny scholar at the rear trembled, not daring to take another step closer.

The scholar in front was more robust, tall in stature, and had a deep, resonant voice.

He replied, "If we wish to settle this matter once and for all, we have to come here."

The wind rustled through the surrounding trees, creating a soft, rustling sound like someone passing by. The frail and slim scholar turned around in a panic, glancing in all directions, but found no one. A sigh of relief escaped him.

He continued to mutter, "I don't know what there is to settle. I had nothing to do with that incident. When you all bullied Situ Yan, I hardly participated... At most, I just called her ugly a couple of times. Now that she's dead, what can we do?"

The frail scholar's mouth didn't stop moving. He kept talking as if to alleviate his fear.

"Well, you didn't do much..." the tall scholar said, his deep voice sounding sinister.

"Come on, stop beating around the bush!" the frail scholar urged, growing increasingly agitated.

"Then..." the tall scholar began, slowly turning his head. Under the eerie moonlight, half of his face was illuminated, revealing a visage that appeared extremely fierce and aloof. He continued, "Do you recognize me?"

"Wu Shao'an!" The frail and slim scholar seemed frightened by the tall scholar's tone, but he was also a little angry. He shouted, "What are you trying to achieve here? If you have nothing to talk about, I won't stay in this spooky place with you any longer. At worst, I'll relocate my entire family from Yanjiao City tomorrow to escape this constant dread."

"Zhang Cong, do you... really not recognize me?" the tall scholar asked again, suddenly turning around and revealing his entire face.

The right half of his face remained a normal visage, while the left half displayed an extensive, grotesque scar like that of a terrible burn. Even the eye socket had lost its shape.

That left half of the face bore an eerie resemblance to a woman's!

"Ah!"

Witnessing this shocking sight, the frail and slim scholar let out a piercing scream and took two steps backward. His legs gave way, and he collapsed on the ground.

Then, the tall scholar's previously intact half of the face also began to shed skin like dry, peeling paint from a wall to reveal the bloodless, ghostly visage of a woman beneath.

"Situ Yan... spare me... spare me..." the frail and slim scholar mumbled as he retreated.

Then he turned around, scrambling to escape the woods.

As he ran, he continued to shout, "Help! Ghosts! Help!"

He finally halted at the edge of the small forest, feeling out of breath. He looked back at the dense woods. It appeared that no one was pursuing him.

"Phew..."

Just as he was about to breathe a sigh of relief, his own hands suddenly clasped his throat, and his eyes bulged outward. The left side of his face began to dry up and peel, revealing thick burn scars.

"Spare me... please, spare me..."

"I'm begging you... ah..."

...

"Why were we invited to the South Mountain Academy when it's haunted?"

On the bustling streets of Yanjiao City, Chu Liang asked Lin Bei.

At first, Lin Bei hastily led him to accept the mission slip and descended the mountain. Because Lin Bei claimed that this mission had substantial reward, he didn't delve into the specifics. It was only now that Chu Liang was getting a clearer picture of the situation.

This place was not far from Mount Shu, and the disciples of Mount Shu were generally familiar with Yanjiao City. When there were mysterious incidents in the city, it was usually the duty of Mount Shu disciples to investigate and resolve them.

However, there were a few exceptions.

Temples, for instance, were the responsibility of Buddhist practitioners. Similarly, for institutions like South Mountain Academy, cultivators who followed the Confucian teaching would be the ones in charge.

In most cases, cultivators of the three schools of thought avoided interfering in each other's affairs unless there were compelling reasons, as it could lead to unnecessary trouble and tensions between sects.

"Hehehehe..." Lin Bei laughed. With a warm smile, he explained, "Regarding the situation at the academy, it naturally should be addressed by cultivators who follow Confucianism. Our role is primarily to protect a student."

He pointed at the grand entrance guarded by imposing stone lions, with a plaque reading "Li Residence."

"Master Li is a well-known figure in Yanjiao City, and his only son, Li Jue, is a student at South Mountain Academy. Recently, the academy has been plagued by mysterious occurrences, and two students have tragically lost their lives.

"He's concerned for his son's safety. And so, he has requested for Mount Shu Sect to dispatch someone to protect his son for a while. Our mission will be considered complete once the haunted case is resolved."

"We will be compensated on a daily basis for our services," added Lin Bei.

Upon hearing the last sentence, Chu Liang felt a wave of relief.

Master Li offered significant compensation in gold and silver, while Mount Shu Sect compensated its disciples with sword coins. For Chu Liang, who had been diligently working towards saving enough for a flying sword, this high-paying mission was precisely what he needed.

As the idiom went, a pillow came when one felt sleepy. This was exactly the situation.

"Ah, the two young heroes from Mount Shu Sect have finally arrived," Master Li personally greeted them, accompanied by his entire family. Their display of respect was indeed considerable.

One of the advantages of being a cultivator was that even the wealthy and influential mortals would exhibit a certain level of respect when encountering you.

"No need for such formality; we're just junior disciples of Mount Shu Sect," Lin Bei responded warmly. "My name is Lin Bei, and this is my fellow disciple, Chu Liang. You look a few years younger than my father, so please allow me to act in a friendly manner and address you as Uncle Li and let me address your son as a brother."

With this, he turned to Chu Liang and said, "Don't feel obligated to be overly formal here. Just treat this place like it's your home."

Chu Liang offered a faint smile.

With someone as socially adept as Lin Bei at his side, he could effortlessly navigate many of the complexities of social interactions.

He couldn't help but notice that behind Master Li stood a quiet young man, dressed in home clothes and appearing to be about sixteen or seventeen years old. He had a fair complexion but prominent dark circles under his eyes, appearing very weary.

This must be Li Jue, Master Li's son, and it was evident that he had a lot on his mind.

As they entered the spacious mansion and arrived in the inner hall, Lin Bei and Master Li were already acting like friends.

"Uncle Li, rest assured that we will take good care of your son. I promise to ensure his safety. We'll be watching over him all day from this point forward. If you ask around in the Mount Shu Sect about Lin Bei..."

Master Li chimed in, "Boy, there's one more thing... While you've been asked to protect my son, can you also keep this a secret from others?"

"Keep it a secret? What do you mean?" Lin Bei and Chu Liang were confused.

"Just... well, I will arrange for you to be enrolled in the academy, and you will be taking classes at South Mountain Academy. By then, all you have to do is to keep an eye on Li Jue and go home with him after school. That's all you have to do. But during this time, make sure nobody figures out that you are specifically protecting him, alright?" Master Li requested as he rubbed his hands.

"Master Li, we will certainly comply with your request. But if you don't mind, can I ask...why?" Lin Bei inquired.

"It's a bit difficult to explain." Master Li smiled and gave an evasive reply.

He wants people to protect his son... but he doesn't want outsiders to notice...? Chu Liang thought.

He cast a glance at Li Jue, who remained silent, and Master Li, who was rubbing his hands.

Why are they feeling guilty?