

The Beauty 171

Chapter 171 Family Love and Romantic Love

"Is everything at the hospital taken care of?" Ling Chen initiated a conversation.

"Almost, if things go well, I'll return to Beijing next week."

"That soon?"

"The hospital in Beijing has asked for my help." At this point, Zhu Xiaozhu looked at Ling Chen and said, "When will you come to Beijing? You could come to see me."

"I can't say for certain. I've got work obligations, and it looks like I won't be able to leave anytime soon."

Before Nanrong Wanqing's crisis is fully lifted, he won't leave casually. Besides, he doesn't have much interest in Beijing. The headquarters of the Ghost Organization is based in Beijing; he's far more familiar with it than Zhu Xiaozhu, a local, could be.

As the nation's political center, it's too chaotic there; East Sea City is much better.

Zhu Xiaozhu seemed hesitant and appeared to hold back something she wanted to say.

Seeing this, Ling Chen couldn't help but ask, "What is it you want to say?"

"Actually, I think for someone as capable as you, it's not necessary to stay with the Nanrong family as security. It's somewhat of a waste of talent. If you're willing, with your abilities, I believe there are better opportunities out there for you." After speaking, she hurriedly clarified, "Don't overthink it. I didn't mean anything else; it's just a suggestion."

Ling Chen gave a faint smile: "I know. But since I chose this job, I should at least see it through. The Nanrong family is facing a crisis right now. It wouldn't be right for me to walk away at a time like this."

"A crisis? A business crisis?"

"Not a business one. The crisis I'm talking about relates to the personal safety of the Nanrong family."

Zhu Xiaozhu nodded, showing an understanding yet puzzled expression, "Given the Nanrong family's vast business and the wide range of areas involved, it's normal to have a few adversaries."

Living in Beijing's big melting pot, she had seen too many such cases to be fazed by them.

"Ling Chen."

"What's up?"

"You and my older brother... did you two have a falling out?" Zhu Xiaozhu bit her lips lightly as she spoke.

Ling Chen's heart stirred, "You mean Zhu Hong?"

"He came to see me today and brought up the matter. I don't know what misunderstandings you two might have, but you're my friend, he's my brother, and I sincerely hope you can put aside past grievances and make peace. If you don't mind, I can try to mediate between you two and set up a time for both of you to clear up any misunderstandings."

"Clear up?" Ling Chen's smile carried a hint of bitterness. "Xiaozhu, I know you mean well, and I understand your feelings, but some things can't be cleared up. What's between him and me... it's not exactly a misunderstanding. Anyway, you should stay out of it. I don't want our relationship to be affected because of him."

"Isn't there any possibility of reconciliation?" Zhu Xiaozhu asked dubiously, "What exactly happened between the two of you?"

Ling Chen shook his head and didn't take up her line of questioning. He could hardly tell Zhu Xiaozhu that Zhu Hong had once plotted against his own life. Such a revelation might have a great impact on her.

"Xiaozhu, since we've made the rare effort to dine out together, let's talk about something else." He smiled, attempting to steer the conversation away.

"I'm sorry."

Zhu Xiaozhu spoke softly. Unable to see a resolution between Ling Chen and Zhu Hong, she truly had no other care in mind. One was the man she admired, the other her biological brother—each held a significant place in her heart.

Hearing her apology, Ling Chen gave a helpless bitter smile. Without a clear answer from him, Xiaozhu probably wouldn't let go easily.

Gazing at the slightly swirling red wine in the tall glass, he pondered for a moment and then spoke, "Xiaozhu, I know you hold deep affection for your brother, but it's difficult for me and him to reconcile. It's not just about me, but also about him. I can't back down in this matter, be it a matter of principle or anything else, I have no choice. If you want us to make peace, then there's only one possibility: he must give in. There's no other way."

He paused, then continued, "Xiaozhu, you are my friend – someone I don't want to hurt. But I can't guarantee anything because nobody knows what the future holds. If I ever do something that wrongs you, I hope you can forgive me."

After listening to his words, Zhu Xiaozhu stared at him blankly, a hint of deep solemnity welling up in her eyes.

Though Ling Chen hadn't spoken plainly, she understood the implicit meaning; the discord between him and Zhu Hong had become irreconcilable. She couldn't comprehend what had happened to make Ling Chen so resolute.

Seeing Zhu Xiaozhu remaining silent, Ling Chen felt a sour ache in his heart. He had planned to enjoy an indulgent candlelit dinner with Zhu Xiaozhu, but now, he simply wasn't in the mood.

The presence of Zhu Hong was more than just a thorn lodged in Zhu Xiaozhu's throat; it was also a needle piercing deep into his own heart.

He never denied that he liked Zhu Xiaozhu very much. In his heart, she was a gentle woman, with a serene temperament and the potential of a virtuous wife and mother—this type of woman is perfect for a life partner.

There had been times when he'd fancifully pondered in his dreams—if he could make Zhu Xiaozhu his wife, how perfect that would be.

Yet, reality was often so cruel that it made every step difficult.

Zhu Hong was Zhu Xiaozhu's older brother—that was an insurmountable gap. If he wanted to be with her, he had to confront this issue head-on.

All this time, he had been trying to ignore it, afraid of adding to his troubles.

But tonight, Zhu Xiaozhu brought it up, and he knew that he could no longer skirt around the matter.

"We only have each other, my brother and I. Since we were children, he has always worked hard to look after me. No matter what I did wrong, he stood up for me, pleaded with our family on my behalf, and took responsibility for my mistakes. In my heart, he has always been a good brother. I once told him that if there were a next life, I would still wish to be his little sister."

Listening to her soliloquy-like narrative, the bitterness in Ling Chen's eyes deepened.

He knew full well that Zhu Xiaozhu was conveying to him the profound familial love between her and Zhu Hong—irreplaceable in her heart.

At that moment, outside the Xiyuan Restaurant, a Rolls Royce escorted by two Range Rovers slowly pulled up to the entrance.

Su Lin was the first to step out of the car, followed by Nanrong Hao pushing a wheelchair, with Nanrong Wanqing close behind.

As Nanrong Wanqing entered, she accidentally glanced at the muscle car in the parking lot and was instantly captivated.

There was only one person in the whole of East Sea City who would drive that kind of car.

Ling Chen, was he here too?

Chapter 172 The Feeling of Heartache

Taking the elevator into the Xiyuan Restaurant, led by the waiter, Nanrong Wanqing, Nanrong Hao, and Su Lin headed straight to the private room they had reserved in advance.

Today is Su Lin's birthday, a rare occasion to celebrate. In addition to her family, she also invited quite a few classmates with whom she had good relationships. As for Zhong Wei and his team responsible for security, they were arranged in an adjacent private room. This way, they would not disturb the celebration, yet could provide protection at any moment.

At this moment, Nanrong Hao was pushing the wheelchair, closely following behind Su Lin.

Ever since entering the restaurant, Nanrong Wanqing's gaze had been searching for Ling Chen. However, all the occupied tables in the hall were shielded by screens, making it impossible to see anyone.

With no other choice, Nanrong Wanqing had to give up looking.

Just then, as the trio was passing a screen, Nanrong Wanqing suddenly called out to Nanrong Hao.

"Sister, what's wrong?"

Nanrong Wanqing did not answer, her beautiful eyes fixed on the screen beside her, as if she were listening to something.

"Xiaozhu, let's not talk about those things. What will happen in the future is uncertain, what we need to do is cherish the present."

Behind the screen, Ling Chen raised his wine glass, smiling, "To be honest, I'm really happy that you were willing to come to my invitation tonight. I hope you can temporarily forget those unpleasant things and truly enjoy tonight's dinner."

Zhu Xiaozhu lifted her head, gazing directly into Ling Chen's deep and clear eyes, and mustered her courage to say, "Ling Chen, we've known each other for quite some time and been through quite a few things. I don't want to deny my own thoughts. Among the men I've met, besides my elder brother, you're the only one who doesn't repel me."

"Xiaozhu, I won't hide it from you, actually I..."

"You don't have to say it." Zhu Xiaozhu's face reddened slightly, "I understand your feelings; Little Hua already told me."

Xiaozhu? Zhu Xiaozhu!

So he was on a date with Zhu Xiaozhu.

Hearing Ling Chen and Zhu Xiaozhu's voices from behind the screen, Nanrong Wanqing suddenly froze, her eyes expressing a complex emotion.

His date turned out to be Zhu Xiaozhu.

For some reason, at that moment, her heart felt a piercing pain, as if being pricked by a needle, and her smooth delicate cheeks paled slightly.

These past days, she had tried to let down her guard and status, and made an effort to interact with him. Anyone with even a slight bit of understanding could see her intentions through her actions.

In her heart, she always viewed herself as a traditional woman and hoped for a lifelong commitment.

Ling Chen had saved her life several times and they had even shared intimate physical contact. No matter how she thought about it, she had to admit that Ling Chen had left a deep impression in her heart.

The days she spent with Ling Chen, however brief, had made her happy. To her, this seemed like a good beginning.

Moreover, that night at the movie theater, Ling Chen had taken the initiative to hold her hand. As a man making such a gesture, as a woman, she understood the meaning behind it.

That night, she had difficulty sleeping, tossing and turning as she thought over many things. If the two of them could continue to interact like this, then maybe this man could be her choice.

But now, hearing the conversation between Ling Chen and Zhu Xiaozhu, the future she had envisioned crumbled down.

It wasn't hard to tell from Zhu Xiaozhu's words that she also had feelings for Ling Chen, and it seemed that Ling Chen reciprocated those feelings.

She wasn't a narrow-minded person; she wouldn't quibble over past incidents. But if Ling Chen had revealed his feelings to her that night at the movie theater, why would he still entangle with another woman?

What made her even more distressed was that the other woman was Zhu Xiaozhu.

Men are fickle, that statement is certainly true.

She smiled self-deprecatingly, she had trusted him too much, originally thinking his feelings for her were sincere. Now it turns out all of it was a lie.

"Sister..." Watching the changing expressions on Nanrong Wanqing's face, Nanrong Hao couldn't help but ask, "Are you feeling unwell?"

"I'm fine, let's go, we shouldn't delay Lin's birthday party."

Nanrong Wanqing's tone was cool and indifferent, but that stunningly beautiful face of hers had a touch of coldness to it, as if she had returned to the previous ice-cold, impassive Nanrong Wanqing.

Sensing her subtle change, Nanrong Hao felt a bit strange, but still held back from asking. He knew his sister's character well; she rarely shared her inner feelings, thus asking would be in vain.

After Nanrong Hao had pushed the wheelchair away, Ling Chen suddenly peeked out from behind the screen, glancing around with confusion in his eyes.

Just now, while chatting with Zhu Xiaozhu, he overheard someone outside calling 'Sister.' The voice was very familiar, seemingly that of Nanrong Hao's, but there was no one outside the screen—inadvertently he had heard wrong?

Closing the screen again, Ling Chen looked at Zhu Xiaozhu sitting across the table and asked, "Xiaozhu, what did Little Hua tell you?"

"Aren't you aware of everything?"

Uhh...

Scratching his head with a smile, Ling Chen muttered to himself, Little Hua that girl is so whimsical, who knows what she's been saying.

After finishing a candlelit dinner and spending time chatting, when Ling Chen and Zhu Xiaozhu left the Xi Yuan Restaurant, it was almost nine o'clock.

Driving Zhu Xiaozhu to the Martial Arts Academy, Ling Chen got out of the car and accompanied her inside.

As they reached the door, Zhu Xiaozhu suddenly turned around, her gaze hesitant while looking at Ling Chen's sharply defined face.

Seeing this, Ling Chen smiled with a grin, "What is it, just say whatever you want to say."

"I... don't be angry after I say it."

"Don't worry, I'm not that petty."

Zhu Xiaozhu said softly, "Thank you for the dinner, but... my attendance tonight doesn't imply anything."

"What do you mean?"

"Actually, I was hoping that tonight's dinner might help clear up the misunderstanding between you and my brother. But now it seems that it was just my wishful thinking. Ling Chen, I don't mean anything else, it's just... I don't know how to make a decision, please give me some time to think it over properly. Is that okay?"

Ling Chen nodded; he understood the complexity of Zhu Xiaozhu's feelings at the moment. Asking her to make a decision right away would be difficult.

"Don't take this matter too much to heart, I know you did it for the sake of my wellbeing and your brother's, but we should resolve our issues by ourselves. I don't want you to get involved. Regardless of the decision you make, I will respect it."

"Thank you."

"What is there to thank. Alright, it's getting late, you should head back and rest, and convey my regards to Mr. He."

Watching Zhu Xiaozhu's figure disappearing into the room, Ling Chen couldn't help but sigh, feeling somewhat gloomy.

Why did Zhu Xiaozhu have to be Zhu Hong's younger sister? It was truly headache-inducing.

If he were to confront Zhu Hong in the future, how should he face Zhu Xiaozhu?

Chapter 173 Attitude Shift (Part 1)

Inside Qingyun Martial Arts Hall.

Zhu Xiaozhu pushed open the door and walked into her bedroom alone, sitting on the bed, staring blankly at the night scene outside the window, continuously recalling the conversation she had with Ling Chen, feeling extremely conflicted inside.

"Xiaozhu."

Suddenly, a voice arose from the bed, startling the unprepared Zhu Xiaozhu. She quickly turned her head, only to see Little Hua crawling out of the quilt, grinning at her.

"What are you doing in my room?" Zhu Xiaozhu asked with dissatisfaction, pretending to spank her.

Little Hua quickly dodged her gentle slap, smiling sweetly, "Sister Xiaozhu, I thought you weren't coming back tonight, so I wanted to spend the night in your room."

"Who said I wasn't going to spend the night, you..." As soon as she spoke, Zhu Xiaozhu immediately grasped the hidden meaning in Little Hua's words, her face turning pink with embarrassment, "You little girl, your thoughts are getting more and more impure."

"Okay! Okay! Sister Xiaozhu, my bad." Seeing Zhu Xiaozhu's raised hand, Little Hua quickly begged for mercy. After saying that, she affectionately wrapped her arms around Zhu Xiaozhu's arm, batting her big, round eyes, "Sister Xiaozhu, how was your date with big brother? When can I start calling him brother-in-law?"

"What brother-in-law? You're talking nonsense again." Zhu Xiaozhu could barely stand her anymore, her speech was always about this topic.

Xiaozhu's eyes darted around, "Then... then have you made your relationship official?"

"No."

"Why? Sister Xiaozhu, big brother likes you and you like him too, such a simple thing, can't you make it clear?"

Zhu Xiaozhu shook her head gently, "It's not for that reason. It's just... him and I might not be suitable."

Little Hua puzzledly asked, "Why?"

Zhu Xiaozhu answered with a bitter smile while stroking her head, "Little Hua, sometimes relationships aren't just about two people, we have to consider many external factors. There are some unresolved issues between your big brother and me, so we can't be together for now."

"External factors?" Little Hua grasped her own pigtails, a look of puzzlement on her face.

"Alright, hurry back to your room and go to sleep." Zhu Xiaozhu patted her little bottom, shooing her out of the room.

Back in He Ziyun's room, Little Hua sat on the bed edge, pouting unhappily, arms crossed, looking quite upset.

Seeing her expression, He Ziyun, who was reading a book, couldn't help but smile, "Girl, what happened? Who made you angry?"

"Humph! It's Zhu Hong, that annoying villain."

"What? Did he bully you?"

"He didn't bully me, but he's too despicable, sabotaging big brother and Sister Xiaozhu's relationship."

"So that's what you're talking about." He Ziyun gave a faint smile.

Little Hua, struck by an idea, clapped her hands, "Old man, I have a good idea. Why don't you sneak into Zhu Hong's house, stuff him in a sack, and throw him into the river, making him silently disappear from this world? That way, big brother and Sister Xiaozhu wouldn't have to worry about him anymore."

He Ziyun chuckled, "You and your wild ideas. We can't touch Zhu Hong for now; he's just a visible chess piece. We need to find out the forces behind him, so we must keep him around. Just be patient."

"What about Sister Xiaozhu then?"

"Fated people will end up together, don't worry needlessly." Pausing a moment, He Ziyun then changed the topic, "By the way, keep an eye out recently; someone has installed cameras in our house, and we're under surveillance. Make sure you don't expose yourself."

"Who did it?"

"Who has been to our house?"

"Zhu Hong! Again, that villain. He better not fall into my hands, or else I'll make him regret it." Little Hua put on a fierce expression, but no matter how one looked at it, it still seemed somewhat cute and mischievous.

The next day.

Ling Chen got up bright and early, exercised for half an hour, then returned to the villa and ate the nutritious breakfast prepared by Nanny Wang.

Just then, Nanrong Wanqing and Su Lin, rubbing her sleepy eyes, came down from upstairs.

"Wanqing, you guys are up just in time; Nanny Wang just made breakfast. Come eat while it's hot."

Ling Chen smiled. He had taken Zhu Xiaozhu back to the Martial Arts Academy last night and by the time he got back it was already past ten, and Nanrong Wanqing and the others had already gone to rest, so he hadn't run into them.

Nanrong Wanqing spoke in a cold tone, "I'm not hungry, you take your time eating; I'm heading to the company now." Saying this, she pushed her wheelchair directly outside.

Feeling the chilly attitude from her, Ling Chen was momentarily stunned. Strange, wasn't everything fine just a few days ago? Why has it suddenly reverted back to before?

Without the time to ponder, he hurriedly stuffed the bread into his mouth and followed Nanrong Wanqing outside.

At the front door, Ling Chen was about to get into the Rolls-Royce, but Zhong Wei, standing in front of the car, closed the door.

"Captain Zhong, what's wrong?"

Zhong Wei glanced at the car window and discreetly pointed to the side. Ling Chen immediately caught on and followed him to the rear of the car.

"Ling Chen, did you upset the Chairman?"

"No, not at all."

"Well, she told me last night that you don't need to follow her car anymore; she wants you to drive your own car to work."

"This..."

Ling Chen was baffled, not having done anything to offend her; why the sudden change?

"Hey, let's head to the company first. You drive and follow behind, we can talk more about it when we get to the company."

"Alright."

Watching the convoy slowly drive into the street, Ling Chen turned and walked towards his own car.

Just then, carrying a bag, Nanrong Hao walked out from the house.

"Brother Chen."

Ling Chen nodded at him, about to sit in the driver's seat, but Nanrong Hao rushed in front of him and asked, "Brother Chen, where did you go last night? You didn't even come to my cousin's birthday party."

"Su Lin's birthday?" Ling Chen was surprised; he was unaware of this. That's right! He suddenly remembered that yesterday at the company, Nanrong Wanqing had asked if he was free in the evening, probably to invite him to the birthday party, and he had ended up declining.

Could it be because of this incident that Nanrong Wanqing gave him the cold shoulder?

That shouldn't be the case, right?

"Where did you guys hold the birthday party last night?"

"Xiyuan Restaurant, it's newly opened, the environment is pretty good; I'll treat you there next time."

Ling Chen's eyes widened; what a coincidence?

"So it was you guys at Xiyuan Restaurant last night."

At the time, he vaguely heard Nanrong Hao calling for 'Sister', but when he went out to look, he didn't see anyone. He thought he had misheard, not realizing they were all at Xiyuan Restaurant last night.

Over the course of one night, Nanrong Wanqing's attitude towards him had drastically changed. Maybe it was because of... Thinking about this, he quickly asked, "Haozi, did your sister have any strange reactions last night?"

"Which sister are you talking about?"

"Nonsense, of course your older sister." Ling Chen anxiously watched him, "Think carefully."

Chapter 174 Attitude Shift (Part 2)

"Chen, if you ask like this, it does seem there was such a matter." Nanrong Hao recalled, "Sister called me to stop when she was passing through the hall, then she seemed a bit uncomfortable, urging me to hurry along."

Indeed!

Ling Chen slapped his forehead, a bitter smile on his face.

It must have been that she saw him on a private date with Zhu Xiaozhu, that's why her attitude changed so drastically.

The relationship between Wanqing and Zhu Xiaozhu was not great originally, and seeing such a scene, it was inevitable for her to be angry, which was quite normal. However, this change in Wanqing made him consider other possibilities.

Wanqing being angry about this indicated that she cared deeply. Given her relationship with Zhu Xiaozhu, it wasn't likely about Zhu Xiaozhu, so the only possibility is...

No way!

He groaned internally. If that was indeed the case, then he couldn't blame anyone else but himself.

He didn't deny that he had special feelings for Wanqing. But, that kind of feeling couldn't yet be called love. It was a sentiment born out of the hardships they shared together, unclear and indistinct.

It wasn't like love, but also not like mere friendship; it was hard to define.

Conversely, Zhu Xiaozhu seemed like a more suitable person for him because the gap between him and the Nanrong family was not small. However, there was also Zhu Hong to consider between him and Zhu Xiaozhu. If Zhu Hong's issue wasn't resolved, his fate with Zhu Xiaozhu was doomed.

Last night chatting with Zhu Xiaozhu, the two of them shared an unspoken understanding, so that final barrier was never broken.

He recalled a few nights ago, still entangled in dreams about choosing between these two women. Now, it seemed, neither was an option anymore.

Indeed, one should not be too greedy, or in the end, it renders everything vain.

"Chen, are you alright?"

Ling Chen waved his hand, "I'm fine, you go to school. I need to head to the office." Saying so, he got into the driver's seat, started the car, and followed the convoy.

Upon reaching the company.

Wanqing had already been escorted to the top-floor office, and he didn't even see her. Standing in front of the elevator, Ling Chen hesitated for a moment, but ultimately gave up on the idea of explaining.

Some things weren't useful to explain, especially since it was indeed his fault towards Wanqing.

However, just as he was set to return to the security department, Zhong Wei suddenly called him, asking him to visit the Chairman's office, mentioning that there was a task for him.

A task? What kind of task?

Full of doubts, he took the elevator to the top floor, reaching out to push the door to Wanqing's office. At that moment, Secretary Wang Lan stopped him and handed him some documents, saying, "This is a task assigned by the Chairman."

Ling Chen opened the documents and glanced through. His expression changed slightly.

"Lan, please tell the Chairman that I will not accept this task. My duty is to protect her safety, not to run errands for her."

"The Chairman anticipated you would say this. She mentioned that if you refuse, then she..."

"What will she do?"

Wang Lan glanced at the office door and pulled Ling Chen aside, whispering, "Mr. Ling, are you having a dispute with the Chairman? Just now when I saw the Chairman, she had a cold expression, completely different from a few days ago."

Ling Chen nodded slightly, embarrassed.

"Mr. Ling, listen to my advice. The Chairman is currently very upset; she definitely won't calm down anytime soon. Don't confront her directly for now; let her mood stabilize first, maybe it'll be better in a few days."

"But..."

"I know what you're worried about. It's okay." Saying so, Wang Lan leaned close to Ling Chen's ear and quietly said a few words.

"Really?"

"Of course it's true. I am the chairman's secretary, all of the chairman's affairs are handled by me, there can be no falsehood."

"Alright." Ling Chen decided to take Wang Lan's advice, "Lan, thanks, I'll treat you to a meal when I return."

"That's what you said, I'll be waiting."

Watching Ling Chen enter the elevator, Wang Lan turned and walked into the chairman's office.

"Has he arrived?" Nanrong Wanqing asked without lifting her head.

"Yes, he has agreed to do as you arranged." After finishing, Wang Lan hesitated for a moment, then continued, "Chairman, Mr. Ling asked me to relay a message, he says... he's sorry."

"Sorry?" Nanrong Wanqing's expression was indifferent, her beautiful eyes revealing a touch of aloofness, "These three words are too easy to say. If all problems could be solved with these three words, then everyone can make mistakes without fear." Saying this, she suddenly realized, telling Wang Lan this seemed somewhat inappropriate. Her tone then became gentler, "Alright, you may leave. I still have work to attend to."

At this moment, having returned to the security department, Ling Chen was sitting in a chair with his legs crossed, and he sighed deeply, his face filled with gloom.

"Hey, you, sighing like that, what is it? Could it be that you were dumped by some beauty?" Tang Yuan teased him.

Ling Chen glared at him, this guy really knew how to rub salt in the wound.

"Didn't Mr. Han task you with transporting items to Beijing? When are you leaving?"

"Day after tomorrow, why, will you miss me? Indeed, without me here, who will you chat and shoot the breeze with."

"Cut it out, I'm not into that, you're not that important in my heart. Hey, enough nonsense, remember to take me with you when you go to Beijing."

Tang Yuan was surprised, "You're going to Beijing?"

Ling Chen nodded, "Yes, the chairman personally assigned the task, I can't disregard it."

"No way, absolutely not, if both you and I leave, who will ensure Miss Nanrong's safety? Don't forget, her crisis is not yet over."

Ling Chen smiled mysteriously, "I know, don't worry, if I didn't have a plan, would I have carelessly agreed?"

Tang Yuan nodded, "Alright, if you're prepared that's fine, but if anything goes wrong, you can't bear that responsibility."

...

For the next two days, Ling Chen was completely cut off by Nanrong Wanqing; entering and leaving at different times, he always deliberately avoided her.

Ling Chen had no choice but to cooperate with her as much as possible, letting her cool off. Her body was delicate to begin with, he didn't want her to harm her health from anger.

On the day of departure, Ling Chen woke up early, said goodbye to no one, carried a simple bag, and drove alone to the airport.

However, he did not notice that when he left, seated at the window on the second floor of the villa was a person, watching his figure disappear.

Airport.

A military transport plane was already prepared.

This transportation was directly organized by Qiao Zhen from Beijing, responsible for transporting the exoskeleton armor. Besides the transport plane, ten special forces soldiers were also on board to ensure the security of the transportation.

As the plane slowly ascended, maintaining altitude, Ling Chen unbuckled his seatbelt and began to walk around the cabin.

At this moment, a communications soldier holding a satellite phone approached Tang Yuan.

"Chief Tang, the General is looking for you."

Tang Yuan took the phone, got up, and walked to the side to listen.

Before long, his face suddenly changed, and he exclaimed, "What?"

Chapter 175 Arriving in Beijing

Looking at Tang Yuan's tightly furrowed brows, Ling Chen suddenly had an ominous premonition.

"Old Tang, what's wrong?"

"There's been an incident." Tang Yuan put down the satellite phone, his face grim, "Recently, we relocated all the research staff from the research institute along with their families to Beijing, but I just received news that one of the more than ten researchers has been missing for two to three days, whereabouts unknown."

"What about his family?"

"The General had people go to look for them, but it was too late, his family has disappeared too. Their residence was under protection, they couldn't have escaped without inside help."

Ling Chen nodded, "Initially, Wanqing suspected that there was a mole in the research institute, but we never identified any suspicious individuals. Now that the research institute is under military control, once the exoskeleton armor falls into military hands, they will never obtain the critical technology of the armor. Their actions now, I'm afraid, are desperate."

"I don't understand, if there's a mole in the research institute, why didn't that person just reveal the location to those people before the military got involved, instead of waiting until now?"

"You think Nanrong Wanqing lacks brains? When she learned about the importance of the exoskeleton armor, she immediately relocated the research institute. Not just the researchers, but other staff too—only designated vehicles were assigned to pick up and drop them at specified locations, and except for Qin Lan who was responsible, no one knew the exact location of the institute."

"So that's how it is." Tang Yuan finally resolved the confusion in his mind, "I didn't expect she had some capabilities."

"Nonsense, could she become the chairman of Hongyu Group without any capabilities? Now, what should we do?"

"Per the original plan, we were to land at the military airport outside of Beijing, but now we need to change the plan."

"Why do we need to change?" asked Ling Chen, puzzled.

"That I'll explain later, the General is still analyzing the intelligence, he'll inform us if there's any change."

Ling Chen scratched his head in frustration, originally hoping for a smooth ride, but now faced with this situation, it was truly troublesome. As he pondered, his gaze shifted towards the cargo hold.

Inside the cargo hold, a rectangular box secured with ropes stood fastened. The box, made from an alloy, was incredibly sturdy—no matter the impact, it would ensure the exoskeleton armor inside remained undamaged. Moreover, the box had three-layer encryption. It required the passwords entered sequentially by Tang Yuan, Han Bing, and Qiao Zhen to be opened, the protection was very thorough.

From East Sea City to Beijing, it was a one-and-a-half-hour flight.

When the transport plane successfully landed at the military airport outside Beijing, everyone in the cabin breathed a sigh of relief, finally arriving safely at the destination.

"Old Tang, I'm heading off, keep in touch when you're free."

After disembarking, Ling Chen slung his backpack over his shoulder, waved to Tang Yuan, and then started walking towards the airport exit.

At that moment, Tang Yuan received a call from the General, and upon hearing the instructions, his expression turned peculiar.

"General, this... this doesn't seem very appropriate?" He hesitated.

As soon as he spoke, the voice on the other end of the phone rose by eight degrees, making him unconsciously pull the phone away a bit.

"Yes, General, don't worry, I assure you I'll complete the mission." After finishing, he suppressed a chuckle and glanced at Ling Chen who was walking away.

"Ling Chen!" Hanging up, he quickly called after Ling Chen, hurrying to catch up.

"What's up?"

Patting his shoulder with a laugh, Tang Yuan said, "It's several kilometers from here to the city, you aren't planning to walk that far, right? This place is a military zone, there are no taxis. Just wait a moment, I'll arrange a car for you."

"Good brother, hurry up."

In less than ten minutes, a jeep drove up to Ling Chen, and a good-looking soldier rolled down the window, greeting him.

"Mr. Ling, get in, I'll take you."

Ling Chen unceremoniously sat in the passenger seat, grinning, "Brother, thanks for the trouble."

Soon after the jeep left the airport, several military vehicles followed out of the airport, heading in the opposite direction.

Sitting in the jeep, Ling Chen hummed a tune, occasionally chatting with the driver to pass the time.

"Brother, how long have you been in the army?"

"Two years, I'm in logistics."

"How's life in the army?"

"Not bad, just that..." The driver hesitated a bit.

Ling Chen burst into laughter, "Just that there are no women, all big lads. There's nothing embarrassing about that, I went through the same back in the days. During closed training, we weren't allowed to leave the base all year, no TV, no cell phones, no contact with the outside world. Damn, you don't know what it's like not seeing a woman for a year, even the female pig in the canteen seemed pretty."

Hearing this, the driver laughed, teasingly said, "Mr. Ling, is that female pig still there?"

Ling Chen chuckled wryly, "You, kid... your thoughts are too dirty."

While they were talking, the driver's expression suddenly changed, and he quickly stepped on the brakes. As the jeep made an abrupt stop, Ling Chen's body lurched forward, looking ahead.

Suddenly, he saw a large truck parked horizontally in the middle of the road, blocking the way.

Huh?

He slightly furrowed his brows, it was wilderness here, how could a large truck be here.

"Mr. Ling, I'll go check it out."

Seeing the other party intending to get out of the car, Ling Chen immediately grabbed his arm, saying, "You stay in the car, I'll go."

The appearance of a large truck in such a remote location was abnormal, he was worried there might be some issue, it was better if he checked himself.

Approaching the truck, Ling Chen climbed up to the driver's cabin, and found it empty, even the keys were removed.

Definitely something wrong!

No one would just randomly park a car in such a place.

"Ah!"

Just then, a loud scream suddenly came from behind.

Ling Chen quickly turned to look back, and at that moment, he saw a strange man standing next to the jeep, forcefully pulling the driver out from the driver's seat, lifting him single-handedly, then forcefully flinging him out.

Bang!

The driver landed heavily on the ground, grimacing in pain, both hands clutching his waist, unable to even stand up.

Seeing the stranger moving towards the car, Ling Chen didn't say another word, immediately jumped down from the truck and quickly ran over. When he reached the front of the car, his legs powerfully pushed off the ground, leaping up, landing on the hood, and kicked the front window's glass with his foot, attacking the man.

The man seeing this, slightly tilted his head to the side, tightly grabbed his ankle and forcefully pulled inward. Ling Chen immediately felt a powerful force coming, almost losing control of his body.

This guy is formidable!

He was inwardly shocked, no time to think further, his hands propped up on the roof of the car, he quickly retreated, freeing his leg from the man's hand.

Chapter 176 Interception

"Are you Ling Chen?" The man moved out from the driver's cabin and sized him up with a playful look in his eyes, as if he wasn't seeing a person, but a prey, emanating an intimidating aura from head to toe.

"Yes, I am. And who are you?"

Seeing the man, Ling Chen slightly furrowed his brows but maintained direct eye contact without flinching. The man in front of him seemed to be in his early thirties, dressed casually, with an unremarkable appearance that would go unnoticed in a crowd. However, Ling Chen could tell at a glance that there was something extraordinary in his gaze.

And after sensing the man's strength, he grew even more cautious; this man was definitely a master.

"Song Qing."

"I don't know you, and I have no grudges against you. Why are you blocking my way?"

Song Qing replied indifferently, "I think you should know the reason. Just let me take the item, and I can spare your life."

"Item?" Ling Chen was struck by a realization and immediately understood what the other man meant, "You must be mistaken, what you're looking for isn't with me."

"What's in the trunk?" After saying that, Song Qing walked to the trunk and pulled off the tarp covering it. Suddenly, an alloy-made box appeared before Ling Chen's eyes.

"This..." Ling Chen's eyes widened in disbelief as he stared at the box, his mind unable to process what he saw.

Damn it, I've been screwed over by Tang Yuan again!

He cursed resentfully. He thought Tang Yuan was kindly helping him by calling a cab to take him to the city center, but in the shadows, he had sneakily put that set of exoskeleton armor in his car.

At least let me know so I can be prepared.

Cursing was one thing, but now that it had happened, he couldn't just run away and abandon the item; that wasn't his style. It seemed he was bound for a fight today.

With that in mind, he shrugged his shoulders and loosened his arms and legs, then beckoned Song Qing with a hook of his finger, "Let's cut the chit-chat. If I lose, you can take the item. But if you lose, I'm sorry, but you'll probably spend the rest of your life in prison."

"We'll see if you've got the skills for that." With those words, Song Qing reached behind his waist, flicked his wrist, and a Soft Sword quickly slid out.

Seeing the weapon his opponent revealed, Ling Chen's gaze sharpened and without hesitation, he drew Wolf Kiss. But looking at his dagger compared to the Soft Sword in the other's hand, he felt irritated; a longer weapon had the advantage, and it seemed like he was at a disadvantage.

Before he could voice his complaint, Song Qing's Soft Sword had already struck, aiming fast at his brow.

Shit, the slightest carelessness could reveal a weakness for the opponent to exploit. Seeing the Soft Sword thrusting at him, Ling Chen quickly adjusted his stance, raising Wolf Kiss to meet it.

Clang!

A crisp sound rang out as Wolf Kiss deftly deflected the Soft Sword. Seizing the opportunity, Ling Chen closed the distance, preparing for close combat with Song Qing.

His dagger was too short; if he allowed Song Qing to fully utilize the Soft Sword, it would be difficult for him to close the distance. Therefore, he had to take the initiative; only by getting close could he limit Song Qing's performance.

Song Qing seemed to understand his intention, quickly stepping back to create distance. But Ling Chen steadily pressed forward, Wolf Kiss relentlessly aiming for his adversary's vital points.

At that moment, Song Qing twisted his waist, found an opening, and thrust the Soft Sword downward from above.

Ling Chen immediately raised Wolf Kiss to block the Soft Sword's attack. However, when Wolf Kiss came into contact with the Soft Sword, the blade suddenly went limp, forming an arc and continuing its trajectory towards his forehead.

Not good!

His expression shifted slightly, and he hastily retreated two steps, narrowly avoiding the Soft Sword's lethal thrust.

Seeing him retreat, Song Qing sneered coldly, her wrist trembling slightly, the soft sword instantly straightened, becoming rigid and unbending.

This is... Inner Strength!

Ling Chen frowned secretly; the person before him was actually an Inner martial arts expert. Because the blade of a soft sword is flexible, it is difficult to control, so very few people master it. However, Inner martial arts experts are different; they can change the hardness of the soft sword at will through their Inner Strength.

Now, he finally understood why that mysterious organization had only arranged for one person to guard this path.

With Song Qing's strength, one person was enough to match more than a dozen people.

"Is that all you've got?" Song Qing said with a disdainful tone, "Jiang Yang died at your hands in vain."

Hearing this, Ling Chen's mouth curled slightly, and then he sheathed his Wolf Kiss.

"Don't be hasty, you'll soon witness what I'm capable of."

Seeing him raise his fists, Song Qing humphed lightly, with a hint of a scornful smile, and the soft sword struck again.

Watching the soft sword thrusting towards him, Ling Chen still stood in place, motionless, his sharp gaze fixed on the tip of the sword.

Suddenly, just as the soft sword was about to reach him, he swiftly shifted his body to the side, his toes rapidly spinning on the ground, his body executing a three hundred sixty-degree turn to end up beside Song Qing, then he swung his fist towards his opponent's face.

Song Qing, seeing this, immediately raised her sword to protect her chest.

But at that moment, Ling Chen suddenly smirked.

This inexplicable smile immediately made Song Qing feel a sense of foreboding. Before she could react, she felt a sharp pain in her leg.

It turned out Ling Chen feigned an attack on her face, which was actually a ruse, the real attack targeted her lower body.

Having taken a kick from Ling Chen, Song Qing's right leg bent slightly, and she nearly lost her balance and her center of gravity. However, her reaction was not slow. She lightly tapped her soft sword on the ground, leveraging that force to straighten her body again.

However, that kick from Ling Chen was still uncomfortable for her, leaving a throbbing pain.

"Not bad for taking one of my kicks."

Ling Chen nodded, looking at Song Qing's physical condition with new respect. The strongest part of his body was his legs, and their strength was several times that of his fists. Over the years, he had encountered countless opponents, but none could withstand his leg strikes.

Even Jiang Yang last time had been defeated by his legs.

Song Qing's face darkened as she yelled out sharply, her body leaping high, one sword strike following another, the speed of her attacks growing faster and faster, causing Ling Chen to be dazzled.

He kept a close watch, constantly moving backward, dodging the soft sword's assaults while secretly seeking Song Qing's vulnerabilities. His martial arts emphasized taking out the enemy with one move; just give him a chance, and he could finish off his opponent.

But Song Qing's assault was fast yet orderly, methodical without chaos, attacking while not forgetting to defend herself. More than a dozen strikes passed, and Ling Chen had not found a suitable opportunity, instead being pushed by Song Qing to the edge of the road.

On both sides of the road were steep slopes; a fall down there would likely cost one half their life.

Thinking this, he glanced sideways, preparing to break through Song Qing's attack from the side. However, Song Qing seemed to anticipate his intention, the direction of her swordplay suddenly changed, shifting from the front to the side, blocking his retreat.

Damn it!

With nowhere to retreat, Ling Chen cursed, and his right hand immediately reached for his waist.

Chapter 177 Mysterious Woman

Immediately, a belt whipped out from his hand, wrapping around the Soft Sword, and then he yanked it back, trying to pull Song Qing down the steep slope.

Song Qing didn't expect Ling Chen to pull such a move, and caught off guard, his body immediately lost its balance, tipping forward and plunging headfirst down the slope. But before Ling Chen could rejoice, his expression suddenly changed drastically.

While falling, Song Qing grabbed at his pants, dragging him down together.

For a moment, both men involuntarily tumbled down the steep slope.

Reaching the bottom, Ling Chen shook his head, groggily getting to his feet. Rubbing his somewhat swollen forehead, he silently rejoiced that the steep slope was covered with weeds and few stones; he wasn't battered, and apart from feeling a bit dizzy, everything else seemed fine.

Catching his breath, he looked around and saw Song Qing lying about ten meters away, still conscious. However, during the fall, his Soft Sword had been lost.

Seeing Song Qing preparing to stand up, Ling Chen didn't hesitate for a moment and immediately charged at him, hoping to take the opportunity to subdue him.

Hearing the rapidly approaching footsteps, Song Qing quickly got to his feet and swung his fist at Ling Chen. As the fist approached, Ling Chen dodged his head and locked onto the opponent's arms, then, with the momentum, performed an over-the-shoulder throw, slamming his opponent's body harshly onto the ground.

However, the ground was covered with weeds and the soil was soft, which didn't cause much damage to Song Qing. The latter performed a kip-up and stood back up, his right leg sending a flying kick in Ling Chen's direction.

Seeing this, Ling Chen didn't dodge, lifting his leg to meet the kick head-on. In terms of legwork, he had never feared anyone.

Bang!

Their legs collided, and both men executed moves swiftly, one after another, in a straightforward, hard-hitting combat style. However, Ling Chen soon realized that the strength he relied upon was no advantage against Song Qing.

Ling Chen's strength stemmed from physical training, while Song Qing's came from the power of his Inner Strength. Although Ling Chen had also trained in Inner Strength, he was only half-trained, a beginner; he couldn't compare with a master of the Inner like Song Qing.

If his external martial arts hadn't reached the peak, he would have had no confidence in this battle.

It is often said that martial arts evolve from the external to the internal: first, train the external arts to lay a solid foundation, then cultivate the Inner Strength, which is the essence of martial arts. Indeed, this saying is true.

Several minutes passed, and the two closely entangled figures finally separated.

Ling Chen bent over, hands on knees, gasping for breath, with sweat pouring from his forehead. Song Qing didn't seem much better; both were severely depleted of stamina.

In those short few minutes, both had exerted all their strength, but unfortunately, neither had gained the upper hand.

"Again!"

Ling Chen straightened up, panting heavily.

Song Qing frowned slightly, watching him, a flicker of hesitation in his eyes. Suddenly, he turned around and ran straight towards the nearby thicket.

"Thinking of escaping?"

Without a second word, Ling Chen followed close behind, rushing into the thicket.

However, upon entering, he found that Song Qing had disappeared from sight. The surroundings were filled with dense branches and underbrush; it was unclear where he had hidden.

After a moment of thought, Ling Chen took out his cellphone from his pocket, called Tang Yuan, explained the situation, and asked him to bring people over quickly.

After giving instructions, he continued to move deeper into the forest, searching for the whereabouts of Song Qing.

Song Qing was skilled in martial arts; he must be a big fish, and perhaps he could pry a lot of information about that mysterious organization from him. Ling Chen didn't want to miss this opportunity.

Not far into his search, Ling Chen suddenly stopped in his tracks, his gaze sweeping slowly over the surroundings. Just then, he had the sensation of a thorn in his back, as if someone was watching him.

He trusted his intuition very much; Song Qing must be nearby, secretly following him. Thinking of this, he withdrew his gaze, quickened his pace, and walked straight toward the bushes in front of him.

Entering the bushes, he fell forward, lying prone in the dense shrubbery, camouflaging his body. At the same time, he pricked up his ears, listening silently to the sounds around him.

Before long, the sound of light footsteps grew from afar and approached his direction.

As expected!

Ling Chen's mouth curled into a slight smile, his judgement was correct.

Hearing the footsteps drawing nearer, Ling Chen tensed his whole body, ready to spring into action, prepared to launch a surprise attack on the other party. As the footsteps passed by in front of him, he suddenly leapt up from the bushes, pouncing on the person beside him to the ground, then raised his fist high, and powerfully smashed it down towards the other party.

However, before his fist could land, Ling Chen froze, staring dumbfounded at the person before him, his mind not quite catching up.

At this moment, the person he had pinned down was actually a woman, and a very attractive beauty at that.

Simply using 'attractive' to describe her seemed somewhat insufficient, but Ling Chen couldn't think of any other adjectives at the moment.

The woman in front of him was about twenty-something years old, with brows like paintings, lips painted red, a face as delicate as an egg and a slender yet voluptuous figure, like a celestial fairy descended from heaven, ethereal and otherworldly.

Despite being dressed in simple coarse cloth, it couldn't conceal her temperament.

Unexpectedly, in such a desolate mountain, there was such a stunning beauty.

While Ling Chen was still startled, the woman under him suddenly swung out a palm, hitting him hard in the chest. Instantly, Ling Chen's body arched backward and he fell to the ground.

Feeling the pain in his chest, he was shocked and struggled to sit up, staring straight at the beauty in front of him.

"So skilled!"

A seemingly light palm, but full of force, he considered himself physically strong, not feeling pain even when clashing directly with Song Qing earlier, but that palm just now was agonizingly painful.

This proved that the woman before him was not just any woman, but also a master.

Seeing the other party looking at him warily, ready to strike at any moment, Ling Chen quickly raised his hands, indicating his intentions.

"I'm not a bad person, it was just a misunderstanding just now. I thought you were the bad one chasing after me."

The other party watched him with a mix of belief and skepticism, seemingly judging the truth of his words.

"Beautiful lady, what is your name?"

"I... don't... have a... name."

The woman slowly started to speak, her speech not very fluent, as if every word she uttered was extremely difficult.

"No name?" Ling Chen found it hard to believe, even cats and dogs have names, let alone people, "Then where do you live?"

"Mountain..."

"You live in the mountains?"

Hearing her answer, Ling Chen began to understand why it was difficult for her to speak. Someone living alone for years without interaction or conversation would easily develop communication barriers over time.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but feel sympathy for the woman before him. So beautiful, yet living alone in the mountains, he wondered what reasons she had for staying in such a desolate place.

Chapter 178 The True Expert

As he thought, Ling Chen suddenly felt uncomfortable all over, especially in his chest. He thought it was nothing major after being hit by that woman, but now he felt suffocated as if he was about to lose his breath, which was extremely uncomfortable.

Seeing his face turn red and his breathing difficult, the woman quickly stepped forward and struck out with her palm again. Ling Chen widened his eyes, watching her movements.

Again? Was she trying to kill him?

Just as the thought arose, the woman's delicate palm had already landed on his body. Instantly, he felt an inexplicable force surge through him, a sweetness rose in his throat, and he spat out a mouthful of fresh blood.

As the clotted blood came out, his breathing became much smoother, and his whole body relaxed. However, when he completely relaxed, he immediately felt his head dizzy and lethargy overwhelmed him.

After the fight with Song Qing, where he severely depleted his physical strength, and now being struck twice by this mysterious woman, he felt he could not take it anymore.

In a daze, he leaned back, lying unconscious in the bushes.

...

He did not know how much time had passed, but Ling Chen finally came to.

He rubbed his temples and slowly sat up, realizing he was lying on a simple wooden bed, covered with a blanket that carried a faint scent of freshness. He looked around and saw that he was in a wooden cabin with nothing but a bed and a desk chair and no valuable decorations - almost everything was made of wood.

"What place is this?"

As he wondered, the door of the cabin was pushed open from outside. Shortly after, a woman came in holding a bowl of rice porridge.

So it was her.

Ling Chen regained his senses and looked at the woman who had injured him yet had also saved him, his eyes flickering with curiosity.

Such a skillful and stunningly beautiful woman living alone in the deep woods must have an untold story. Generally, he wouldn't be interested in others, but with such a beauty, he wouldn't mind delving into her secrets.

At that moment, the woman approached the bed and handed him the bowl of millet porridge, "Eat..."

Ling Chen smiled slightly, knowing she spoke with difficulty. Without waiting for her to finish, he took the porridge with both hands. Driven by immense hunger, he gulped it down greedily, leaving not a single grain at the bottom of the bowl.

The more severe the physical exhaustion, the hungrier he got.

After finishing the bowl of porridge, Ling Chen felt a significant relief throughout his body, not feeling as uncomfortable as before.

"Thank you."

The woman took the empty bowl, placed it aside, and then sat down in front of the bed. Her clear eyes stared at him unblinkingly, as if she was assessing an interesting object.

Being stared at so unrestrainedly, even Ling Chen with his thick skin felt a bit embarrassed.

He coughed lightly and chuckled, "Beauty, do you really not have a name?"

The woman gently shook her head.

"Then..." Ling Chen glanced at the empty porridge bowl, "I'll call you Porridge Girl, we need some kind of address."

"Whatever."

"How many years have you lived here?"

Porridge Girl stretched out two fingers, and Ling Chen immediately understood. Twenty years! He clicked his tongue in wonder. This woman had actually lived in this deserted place for twenty years; it must have been hard for her, wondering how she got through these long years. If it were him, living alone in such a desolate place, not to mention twenty years, he'd go mad just after two or three years.

Thinking of this, he couldn't help but admire the persistence of the porridge girl.

"Other than you, has no one else been here?"

"There has, my... Master... Master."

"Master?" Ling Chen nodded secretly. He knew it, the porridge girl's skills were so formidable, it must have been taught by a master, "Doesn't your master live with you?"

Mentioning her master, the porridge girl's expression suddenly dimmed, her eyes carrying a touch of faint sorrow.

Seeing this, Ling Chen knew he had touched on her tragic past, and hurriedly apologized: "I'm sorry."

"You..."

The porridge girl was about to speak, but at that moment, she seemed to hear something, suddenly stood up, and turned to look outside the door.

"What happened?"

"There's... someone."

Ling Chen listened carefully, but it was silent outside, not a sound. He gave a bitter smile, he had always thought his martial arts were not bad, but compared to the porridge girl, he was far weaker.

Watching the porridge girl walk out, Ling Chen immediately threw off the blanket, got out of bed, and followed her out of the wooden cabin.

Stepping out of the cabin, Ling Chen was surprised to find that the cabin was actually built on a large tree. Rather than a wooden house, it seemed more appropriate to call it a treehouse. The treehouse was hidden by lush branches and foliage, making it difficult to spot without careful attention.

At that moment, the porridge girl leaped forward from a branch over five meters high and jumped down. Landing on her feet, she slightly bent her knees and made no sound even though she stepped on dry leaves.

Seeing the height, Ling Chen hesitated briefly, then gave up the idea of jumping down. His condition wasn't good now, better not to overdo it. Plus, the perspective from the tree branch was good, his gaze could cover the surroundings.

However, in the blink of an eye, the porridge girl had disappeared from his sight, not knowing where she had gone.

During this contemplation, a rustling sound approached from far to near. Ling Chen looked up and saw a middle-aged man walking towards him through the shrubs.

"Song Qing?" Ling Chen's eyes brightened slightly, the corners of his mouth lifting slightly, finding what one sought effortlessly after much effort, he had wanted to find him and here he came on his own.

Thinking this, he grabbed the rope beside the treehouse, preparing to slide down and capture Song Qing.

However, before he could act, Song Qing, who was underneath the treehouse, suddenly stopped and looked around with a wary expression, coldly saying, "Who's there? Come out!"

Seeing no response, Song Qing slightly furrowed his brow and said: "Ling Chen, I know it's you, stop sneaking around, come out." Saying that, he picked up a roughly one-meter long tree branch from the ground, tightly gripping it in his hands.

Suddenly, a figure flashed, and the sound of wind attacked; Song Qing quickly turned around, stabbing the branch fiercely backwards.

However, just as he moved, Song Qing was shocked, staring dumbfounded at the woman who suddenly appeared in front of him. She had caught his stabbing branch between two fingers.

"Who are you?"

"Porridge girl, be careful, that guy is a bad person."

Hearing Ling Chen's voice from the treehouse, Song Qing's face changed starkly, and he coldly shouted: "So you two are in this together, go to hell!"

With a loud shout, he flicked his wrist, and the branch immediately snapped. Then, holding the broken half of the branch, he thrust forward once again towards the porridge girl.

The porridge girl stood there without any expression, seeming not to take his attack seriously. As the tip of the branch almost reached her, she didn't move her hands, and Song Qing's body was suddenly struck hard, flying up from the ground and heavily falling back down.

Chapter 179 Master Ranking

This woman...

Ling Chen couldn't help but be astonished. Just now, from the treehouse, he had a clear view of the moment the porridge girl made her move.

Fast! Too fast! Even his eyes could barely keep up with her movements. In this moment, he felt his own skills were utterly weak compared to hers; this was a true expert.

After being repelled by a move from the porridge girl, Song Qing lay on the ground gasping for breath. Clenching his teeth, he struggled to rise from the ground and while staring coldly at the porridge girl opposite him, said icily, "Who on earth are you?"

The porridge girl silently stared at him.

"Song Qing, you might as well stop asking and surrender quietly," Ling Chen grinned. With the help of the porridge girl, Song Qing had no chance of escaping.

"Song... Qing, your name is... Song Qing?" The porridge girl suddenly spoke up, "The... Tiger List... ranked sixth... Song Qing?"

Song Qing's eyes went cold, "You know me?"

"Tiger List... a strong fighter, but... nothing special."

"You..." Song Qing's face showed a slight change of color, and he was about to shout in anger, but before he could speak, a heavy punch had already landed. With a grunt, he spat out a mouthful of fresh blood and lay face down on the ground, unconscious.

"So much nonsense," said Ling Chen as he retracted his fist. While Song Qing and the porridge girl were talking, he had slid down from the treehouse and knocked Song Qing directly to the ground.

After finding some hemp ropes, he tied Song Qing up and bound him to a tree trunk, then he and the porridge girl returned to the treehouse.

Sitting at the table, Ling Chen looked at the porridge girl beside him and asked curiously, "Do you know Song Qing?"

"Don't... know him, just heard of," she replied.

"What did you mean just now by the Tiger List?"

"It's a ranking list," the porridge girl finally spoke much more fluently after so much conversation, "Besides the Tiger List, there's also the Dragon List, Heavenly List, and Earthly List. Those who make it onto the lists are all experts. You practice martial arts, don't you know of it?"

Ling Chen gave an embarrassed smile, "To be precise, I can't really consider myself a conventional martial artist."

He was an elite trained by the military, all his skills were honed in actual combat, and of course, this was also due to his own efforts. However, he wasn't very familiar with the 'Martial Arts World' within the country, as he hadn't had any encounters with it. The so-called Dragon and Tiger List, Heavenly and Earthly List, were probably only known to those involved in these circles.

After thinking for a bit, he asked, "About these four lists you mentioned, how are they ranked?"

"The Heavenly List is at the top, followed by the Earthly List, the Dragon List is third, and the Tiger List is last. Each list includes ten people," explained the porridge girl.

Hearing this, Ling Chen felt somewhat embarrassed. He thought he was quite skilled, but the porridge girl's words made him realize, there are always stronger people out there.

Song Qing was the Tiger List's sixth, and since he could fight to a draw with him, it meant he also had the qualifications to be on the list. However, the Tiger List was the bottommost, and there were three more lists above it. What did this mean? Huaxia, this vast land with hidden dragons and crouching tigers, full of talent. Although he had rarely encountered a match abroad over the years, he only realized upon returning home that he had been looking at the sky from the bottom of a well.

The real experts would always keep a low profile.

"Porridge girl, which list could you rank on?"

"Don't know, I might just barely make it onto the Earthly List."

Uh...

Ling Chen was momentarily stunned, the porridge girl's skills were so good, yet she could only just barely make it onto the Earthly List; he couldn't imagine how much more formidable the number one of the Heavenly List would be.

"Since you are aware of Tiger List's Song Qing, it seems like you know the people on the list quite well."

The porridge girl nodded, "Heaven, Earth, Dragon, Tiger - I know everyone on all four lists, they are all my targets."

"Targets?"

"Master said, when I can defeat them, then I will be qualified to leave this place."

Ling Chen was surprised. Her master had set such a rule, that was simply making things difficult on purpose. With so many experts on both the Heavenly List and Earthly List to challenge one by one, defeating them all was almost harder than reaching the heavens. More importantly, the porridge girl was still so young; by the time she achieved her goal, she would probably be old already. By then, even if she could leave, what good would it do?

If the most precious time of one's life is wasted on pointless struggle, what's the point of it all?

As he thought this, he felt quite undeserved on behalf of the porridge girl; her master was simply a freak without a shred of humanity.

While they were talking, Ling Chen suddenly heard his cellphone ringing in his pocket. He took it out and saw it was a call from Tang Yuan, which he immediately answered.

"Hello, you've arrived? Alright, wait there for me, I'll be right over."

After hanging up, Ling Chen turned to look at the porridge girl, who had already stood up before he could speak, saying, "I'll take you out."

Leaving the treehouse, with the bound Song Qing, still unconscious, on his back, Ling Chen followed the porridge girl as they walked outside.

After about a kilometer, the porridge girl pointed towards the north and said indifferently, "Beyond that woods, you'll be able to find your companions."

"Thank you!"

"You can go now." After finishing her sentence, the porridge girl turned around and walked back the same way she came.

Watching the lonely and desolate figure of the porridge girl, Ling Chen felt a sudden pang of reluctance. Such a vibrant and young lady living alone deep in the mountains and forests was truly a pity.

If it weren't for his pressing business, he really wanted to stay and have a good chat with her. It was evident the porridge girl longed for human interaction; otherwise, why would she offer a helping hand to a stranger?

With a heavy sigh, he shouldered Song Qing and quickened his pace.

Returning to the foot of the steep slope, Ling Chen only saw several military jeeps parked at the roadside on the slope.

"Old Tang!" Ling Chen shouted loudly, and Tang Yuan quickly popped his head out from within one of the vehicles.

Shortly after, Tang Yuan threw down a rope and pulled Ling Chen up the slope.

"Here you go! I've brought him to you." Ling Chen threw Song Qing onto the ground with a thump, immediately waking him up. However, before he could resist, he was taken into custody by several soldiers and thrown into the vehicle.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Tang Yuan asked with concern.

Ling Chen said irritably, "You have some nerve to ask. If it weren't for you, would I have suffered like this? If you dare to do this again in the future, don't blame me for not being polite as a brother."

Tang Yuan responded with an air of injustice, "You can't blame me for this, it was the General's intention. According to intercepted intelligence, they suspected someone would attempt to hijack the vehicle on the way, so we acted as targets to lure the enemy away, while you were to stealthily transport the goods to divert attention."

"Did you also get ambushed?"

"Let's not talk about that. Thankfully, the General had the foresight to make preparations in advance, which saved the exoskeleton armor."

Ling Chen nodded, then asked, "By the way, where's the driver who drove me here? Is he alright?"

"He's fine, just passed out, and we've already taken him to the hospital."

"That's good. Hey, lend me a car, I'll go to the city by myself, to avoid getting tricked by you again."

Chapter 180 Heavenly Mechanism Pavilion

Upon entering Beijing, it was already noon.

Ling Chen parked the car on the side of the road, randomly picked a restaurant to fill his stomach, and then drove to his destination.

Half an hour later, he arrived in front of a high-end office building. With the documents given to him by Nanrong Wanqing, he entered the lobby, ready to ask the receptionist for information. But at that moment, a familiar voice came from behind: "Ling Chen."

He turned around and saw Liang Zhao Hui quickly approaching, his face full of smiles.

"Why are you just arriving now?"

"I ran into some trouble and was delayed a bit. Where's the chairman?"

"She's upstairs in a meeting with someone. Hey, be careful later, the chairman asked you to deliver the documents. She has been here for half a day, and you still haven't shown up. Just now, from the look on her face, she seemed very angry."

Ling Chen shrugged his shoulders; he wanted to be on time too, but who would have expected that kind of accident to occur. On that day, Nanrong Wanqing's secretary Wang Lan told him that Nanrong Wanqing would be going to Beijing to attend a shareholder meeting in two days. If it weren't for this reason, he wouldn't have left his responsibilities behind and traveled all the way to Beijing.

Following Liang Zhao Hui upstairs, they entered a spacious reception room, where Zhong Wei and others were sitting on the sofas, waiting for the meeting to end.

"Mr. Ling, you've finally arrived."

Wang Lan hurried over, took the documents from him, and then turned and went back to the meeting room.

"Captain Zhong, how long does the chairman plan to stay in Beijing?"

"It's still uncertain, maybe two or three days. Why, do you have something on your mind?"

"No, just asking."

Less than ten minutes later, the shareholder meeting finally ended. While chatting idly with Zhong Wei, Ling Chen learned that aside from the Hongyu Group in East Sea City, Nanrong Wanqing had also invested in several companies in Beijing, and was looking to expand the group's business into Beijing in the future.

Seeing Nanrong Wanqing being wheeled out of the meeting room by Wang Lan, Ling Chen and several others from the Zhong team immediately went up to greet her.

Nanrong Wanqing looked at Ling Chen with an expressionless face and asked coldly, "Where have you been? You're so late."

"I'm sorry, there was an unexpected issue on the road, and I got delayed. I assure you that I will not..."

"Zhong Wei, let's return to the hotel." Before Ling Chen could finish, Nanrong Wanqing had already signaled to leave.

Seeing this, Ling Chen couldn't help but give a wry smile. He had to endure the consequences of his own actions, even if it meant swallowing his tears.

Nanrong Wanqing spent the afternoon in her hotel suite dealing with matters and did not go out. As night descended, Ling Chen used his phone to call Ye Liangyong. After all, since he was in Beijing, he might as well pay a visit.

When he received his call, Ye Liangyong was delighted, insisting on inviting him to dinner for a proper chat. Soon, Ye Liangyong personally arrived at the hotel by car. Originally, he wanted to take Ling Chen somewhere else, but since Ling Chen was responsible for Nanrong Wanqing's safety, it was not convenient to go too far, so the two went to the hotel's private restaurant.

"Ling Chen, how is my master doing?"

"Mr. He is in great health, better than many young people."

"I originally wanted to visit him in East Sea City, but work at the company has been so busy that I just couldn't find the time."

Ling Chen smiled slightly: "Mr. Ye, you are a busy man of great importance; Mr. He will surely understand." He paused for a moment, then changed the subject, "Mr. Ye, I want to ask you about something. Have you heard of the Heaven and Earth List and the Dragon and Tiger List?"

"Anyone who practices martial arts knows about them. What about it?"

"There's nothing much, I just heard someone mention it today, so I'm quite interested."

Ye Liangyong said longingly, "The Heaven and Earth Dragon and Tiger Four Rankings are the pursuit of all martial artists; everyone wants to be on the lists. It represents not only strength but also honor and status. Don't laugh at me, but actually, my name is also on one of the lists."

"Really?"

"Tiger List, ranked tenth, at the very bottom." He said this with a sigh of resignation, "To tell you the truth, I really don't want this name."

"Why?"

"Many who are not on the list want to squeeze into the Tiger List. To do that, they must challenge those who are on it. I'm ranked tenth, the weakest one. Anyone who can beat me can eliminate me and qualify for the ranking. So, every month, quite a few people come to challenge me. If I happen to meet an equal opponent, it's a good thing, as we can exchange skills and improve. But the problem is, those challengers are of mixed abilities, without any real skill, yet you can't refuse to accept the challenge. Otherwise, words might spread that you're scared. This matter really bothers me."

As he spoke, he glanced at Ling Chen and smiled, "Since you're so interested, how about I give you the tenth position on the Tiger List? Last time at the Martial Arts Academy during our spar, I lost to you, so it's only right to pass the position to you."

Ling Chen quickly waved his hand, "Forget it, I hate being troubled. Hey, Mr. Ye, who actually ranks these Heaven and Earth Dragon and Tiger Four Rankings? It seems like everyone seriously trusts the placement on this list."

"Heavenly Mechanism Pavilion. You must have heard of Heavenly Mechanism Pavilion in some TV dramas and novels. In fact, it's not fiction, but a real entity. It is said that Heavenly Mechanism Pavilion originated hundreds of years ago, specializing in collecting martial arts secrets and anecdotes of the famous, while never getting involved in fights, with an aloof status. Even after hundreds of years, Heavenly Mechanism Pavilion has retained its complete form. Now, keeping up with the times, it has become a mysterious sect. However, it's more appropriate to call it an organization nowadays."

"Heavenly Mechanism Pavilion operates in secrecy and possesses many confidential channels to collect all kinds of information. They keep records of all the experts, along with assigning rankings to all of them."

"What kind of rankings?"

"Among the experts of the world, there are nine grades in total, grades one to three are the lower tier, four to six are the middle tier, and seven to nine are the upper tier. In the Heaven and Earth Dragon and Tiger Four Rankings, the Tiger List is the lower tier, the Dragon List is the middle tier. Experts of the seventh and eighth grade can enter the Earthly List, and only those of the ninth grade can enter the Heavenly List. Any martial artist without a grade is considered insignificant."

"Mr. Ye, what about you...?"

"I'm a First Grade, you should be around Second Grade." Seeing the surprise on Ling Chen's face, Ye Liangyong said, "The martial arts of Huaxia are profound and unmatched by outsiders. For someone of your young age to be graded is already very admirable. With your talent, if you work hard, there might be a chance for you to enter the Heaven and Earth List in the future."

Ling Chen touched his nose. The Heaven and Earth List was too distant for him right now. Besides, he had no interest in competing for rankings; a simple and quiet life was what he pursued.

After finishing the meal.

Ling Chen returned to his hotel room and lay quietly on the bed, still thinking about the porridge girl he had just met.

That woman had given him a very mysterious impression—a young yet already an expert on the Earthly List.

...

At this moment, in a treehouse hidden among the dense foliage.

The porridge girl sat at the doorway, legs dangling in the air, flipping through a stack of old photographs in her hand.

When her eyes landed on a yellowed old photo, she suddenly froze, unable to shift her gaze for a long time.

In the photo, a young man was standing with a smile, like a gentle breeze that felt warming to the soul.

"Master..." she muttered to herself, her eyes involuntarily reddening.

If Ling Chen were here, he would be shocked by the man in the photo.

Because the man was his father, whom he had not seen for many years.