

REBIRTH OF STAR GENERAL

C-Drama: The Female General



Qian Shan Cha Ke

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# Chapter 1: THE FEMALE GENERAL

In Da Wei, it was the 63rd year of Qing Yuan. It was March, and the spring season was at its full bloom. The light drizzles shrouded the city with mist, and the land had dampened due to the continuous pitter-patter of raindrops.

In Jing Cheng, the roof tiles of the the Xu Family’s house had become bright and clear after the rain, creating a glorious and clean texture. Those tiles which were delivered from Yun Zhou and had the semblance of a half-moon. It was said that these tiles would look as if they were illuminated by the glow of fireflies in a bright, moonlit night. The tile-making process was rather complicated, and the tiles came with a heavy price. The price of a whole roof built with these tiles was equal to a common family’s decades of hard work.

However, in the capital city, the Xu Family’s satin and silk business was on demand throughout the country, and the price of a whole roof built with half-moon tiles was nothing but a drop in the bucket to them. Master Xu was the prince’s esteemed tutor. He had two sons. His elder son, Xu Zhi Heng was outstandingly talented and was a student at Han Lin Academy. Since young, he was praised by everyone in the capital city of Jing Cheng. When Xu Zhi Heng was eighteen, he was married to a young lady from a family of generals. The He Family’s Second Lord’s first daughter, He Yan, became his wife. The He Family’s Eldest Lord’s first son, He Ru Fei, had been presented the title of General Fei Hong by the emperor himself. The marriage of two people, one with civil virtues and the other with martial virtues, was indeed the perfect union.

“Furen, is there anything you desire for?” A young servant girl wearing thin clothes asked with a crisp voice as she handed over a cup of hot tea.

“I’m going out for a walk.” He Yan answered and finished the tea in one shot.

“But it’s raining outside…”

“It’s fine, I’ll use an umbrella.”

The servant girl looked at this young lady. The Xu Family was a family of scholars, and all the ladies here dressed up elegantly, including her mistress, He Yan. However, she had a stingy temperament, which made her incompatible with others. Yet, when she wore the azure blue camlet satin dress, He Yan actually looked very gorgeous, and her heroic and distinct features only emphasized her beauty. Her eyes were clear and distant just like the translucent water of a lake… Unfortunately, she was blind.

He Yan wasn’t blind at birth. Just after three months of her married life, she suffered from a mysterious disease, and had a high fever for two days and two nights. When she woke up the next day, she had lost her eyesight. The Xu Family tried to find highly qualified doctors to return her eyesight, but did not succeed. Since then, He Yan didn’t go out frequently. After all, it was inconvenient for a blind person to go out.

He Yan walked towards the arbor located in the middle of the courtyard’s pond.

She had been married to the Xu Family for a year. She had lost her eyesight after the first three months of her conjugal life. She then spent the next nine months learning how to live without her eyesight. She adapted well. It was just that she would occasionally miss her life before her marriage, when she could see. Now, she could hear the sound of raindrops making ripples on the pond water. She could listen the red carps in the pond fighting for food… but she could not see.

An unseen spring scenery could still be a beautiful scenery to a person who couldn’t see.

Maybe it was because she lost her eyesight too soon that she couldn’t remember Xu Zhi Heng’s appearance very well. All she could remember was the Xu Zhi Heng she had met when she was 14. He was a young boy clad in green, smiling warmly as he offered his hand to her. The present Xu Zhi Heng would not offer his hand to her anymore. Even though he treated her gently and politely, she could definitely feel something faintly blocking their relationship.

But she wouldn’t tell anyone.

Her years of experience in the army had taught her how to deal with a man. As expected, she never learnt how to carry herself like an elegant woman of a noble family. While she was forlorn and bored, she could only see Xu Zhi Heng doting on He yiniang. After that, she had lost her eyesight, but she got back her leisure time. She felt she was fortunate as she would not be able to see those heart-breaking scenes anymore.

She sat quietly in the arbor, recalling her years in the army. It was also a fine spring day like today, and it was drizzling too. She had taken a seat in the middle of the soldiers, smiling as she drank a bowl of liquor which heated up her whole body. The very thought of this fond memory filled her with enthusiasm. Suddenly…

He Yan held onto the handrail as a burst of sweetness gushed through her throat, and she spit out a mouthful of blood with a ‘puff’ sound.

Someone’s footsteps approached slowly.

He Yan asked cautiously: “Xiao Die?”

No one answered. The footsteps stopped. He Yan frowned, “Yiniang?”

After a moment, a woman’s voice resounded in her ears: “Good hearing, Furen.”

She felt intrigued, and her sharp and accurate intuition made her take precautionary steps subconsciously. He Wan Ru was always gentle and graceful and didn’t talk to her much. Her sudden arrival, her talking in such an arrogant tone… it made He Yan feel uneasy.

This was absurd. He Yan was never qualified to be the matriarch of the Xu Family and was only an ornament adorning the family. Her uselessness could be emphasized by the fact that she could not stop He Wan Ru from taking her husband away, and more importantly, how could a blind person possibly be a threat? He Wan Ru neither had the necessity nor a reason to harm her.

“What’s the matter?”

He Wan Ru caressed the hairpin near her temple. It was a gift she had received from Xu Zhi Heng the day before. She withdrew her hand as she suddenly remembered the fact that the one standing in front of her was blind. She said tonelessly: “Furen, you are pregnant.”

He Yan was stunned.

“The doctor who usually checks your eyes took your pulse a few days ago. You are pregnant.”

He Yan was slightly happy but at the same time, she was at a loss. Before she could utter a word, she heard He yiniang sigh: “It’s a pity.”

A pity?

The smile tugging at the corner of He Yan’s mouth faded, as she asked: “What’s a pity?”

“It’s a pity you can’t keep this child.”

He Yan snapped: “He Wan Ru! How dare you!”

Her willow-leaf shaped eyebrows frowned, her gaze became as sharp as a blade. Although she was blind, she looked captivating. It even made He Wan Ru’s hair stand on end for an instant. After a while, He Wan Ru composed herself and said: “These words are not only mine, General He.”

As the words, ‘General He’ came out of her mouth, He Yan felt pins and needles pricking her scalp.

She asked: “What do you know?”

“Everything I should and should not know. General He, how can the He Family and Xu Family let you stay alive when you keep such a big secret?”

He Yan was speechless.

Before having a general like General Fei Hong, the He Family was just like any other noble family in Da Wei, all on the verge of declining. Nineteen years ago, two wives from the He Family gave birth to two children at the same time. He Family’s Eldest Furen gave birth to He Ru Fei, while Second Furen gave birth to He Yan.

The rank of nobility should have been given to He Ru Fei, but He Ru Fei was frail and the doctors said he would not be able to live past three years. If He Ru Fei died, the He Family’s rank of nobility would be taken back, and the whole family would lose everything it had required centuries to build.

The He Family discussed it and made a bold decision. They made He Yan replace He Ru Fei and sent the frail He Ru Fei to live in the temple as He Yan.

He Yan grew up using He Ru Fei’s identity. Although she was borne by the second wife, she lived as the child of the first wife. She considered herself a boy ever since she was a kid and showed great interest in learning the martial arts. When she was fourteen, she secretly applied for the Fu Yue Army and gradually gained fame as she fought in the battles, and, consequently, the emperor himself granted her the title of General Fei Hong. It would have been an honorable occasion to meet the emperor himself at the palace.

By this time, He Ru Fei, who was sent to the temple to ‘convalesce’ had returned.

He Ru Fei hadn’t died, and instead grew up peacefully till he turned eighteen. He looked agile and graceful, healthy and handsome. Thus, everything was back to its original place.

He Ru Fei met the emperor in He Yan’s stead and became the General Fei Hong, while He Yan remained as He Yan. Everything wasn’t as difficult as they thought it would be. To prevent others from finding out this secret, a stipulation was made. He Yan always wore a mask in the public, as no one had ever seen He Ru Fei’s face. Later on, He Yan was arranged to marry the young and talented bachelor student of Han Lin Academy, Xu Zhi Heng, by the He Family.

Xu Zhi Heng was handsome and gentle, considerate and polite, and her mother-in-law was never harsh to her—it was a perfect marriage. He Yan thought so too, until today. Yet, the tender mask was being torn off, revealing the bloody truth… it made one’s heart cold. This situation was even worse than the hardest battles she had fought.

“The decoction you had drunk that made you blind was instructed to be sent to you by the elders of your family. But as you know, the dead tell no tales. If you live, you will be your family’s greatest threat!”

“When you drank the decoction, the lord was watching you from the next room.”

“When you die, the Xu Family and the He Family will only feel relieved. Just blame yourself.”

He Yan laughed loudly.

Blame her?

What was there to blame?

Blame her for substituting He Ru Fei for the He family’s benefit? Blame her for being obsessed with martial arts and becoming a soldier? Blame her for killing the country’s enemies and fighting for peace on the battlefield? Or blame her for being granted the title of General Fei Hong by the emperor himself, and letting He Ru Fei accept it in her stead?

Blame her. Blame her for being a girl. She could not achieve anything honestly and uprightly for her own name, because she was a girl. She deserved to be sacrificed and to pave a path for the He Family’s son, because she was a girl. After all, she overestimated the He Family’s kindness and underestimated the He Family’s selfishness.

And Xu Zhi Heng… she must have been blind all along to think he was a good person.

“What are you laughing about?” He Wan Ru frowned.

“I’m laughing at you,” He Yan talked in her direction, emphasizing each word: “You are so ridiculous that you make me laugh. I will die because of this secret, and what makes you think you’ll live since you keep this secret too?”

He Wan Ru sneered: “You are still so obstinate when you are facing death! Guards——”

Several guards appeared and in a matter of seconds encircled He Yan.

“Finish her off!”

A fragile willow branch could still be a weapon. It could be as soft and as flexible as a woman’s hand. It was clearly a light and young twig with tender green shoots on it, yet it was like a sword embroidered with flowers, easily brushing away the enemy’s weapon.

He Wan Ru had heard of General Fei Hong before—she was aware that this woman was brave and skillful in warfare unlike any other normal woman, but she had never thought that the rumors could be true until she saw He Yan fight with her own eyes.

He Yan was blind, but she could still take on ten people by herself. She kicked away the guard in front of her, as if she was planning to break through this ghastly backyard, mount on a horse, and leave before anyone could stop her.

However, she suddenly fell from midair, like a wild goose shot by an arrow. The blood she spat out splattered on the grass, like small spots of wild flowers.

That cup of tea… the tea her maid, Xiao Die gave her… it was probably the cause…

She had lost her vision, and now she lost all her five senses, one by one. She had been a person truly blind to the cruelty of life, losing the battle she had fought so desperately before.

They did this foolproof preparation, just to kill her.

“Fools! Do it now!” He Wan Ru yelled anxiously.

He Yan wanted to raise her head but someone hit her leg hard from behind. She felt excrutiating pain on her knees and heard something snap. Her legs tottered, making her knees bend. The next moment, someone punched her from behind.

The fists that hit her felt like raindrops falling hard on her, making her viscera hurt like hell.

They wouldn’t hurt her with swords and blades, they wouldn’t leave a trace of evidence on her body.

Someone pulled her hair, dragging her towards the pond, and pressed her head into the pond brutally. Her eyes, nose, mouth and neck submerged in the water, making her unable to speak. She realized that she was drowning in the pond water and she struggled to get back up, but the surface of water was getting away from her, bit by bit. Suddenly, it was as if she was back in her homeland. While she was in a tranced state, she could hear the old folksong, the song she had sung when she was with the army… she could hear everyone reading books out loud in their own local accents… and He Wan Ru’s voice, filled with panic.

“Help! Furen is drowning—”

She wanted to go home.

However, now she knew the truth—she was homeless.

# Chapter 2: SIBLINGS

The spring rain never seemed to end. Outdoors, it was raining cats and dogs.

However, the house was warm inside. The fire was crackling excitedly. Steam rose up from the medicinal herbs which were being boiled with a ‘glup, glup’ sound.

A young girl was seated in front of a copper mirror. The mirror reflected a thin and slightly pale face. The owner of the face looked sick and languid. Her lips were pressed together like a water chestnut and revealed a delicate but alienated look. The pair of black, watery eyes shaped like apricots looked just like a mountain stream shrouded with mist, which would reveal a magnificent gem when the mist dispersed. Her skin was as white as snow and her facial features were fair and elegant. She was an attractive young lady of sixteen.

Needless to say, she was aware of her own beauty. Different varieties of rouge, gouache, perfumes, and hair balms covered her little dressing table. The whole room reeked of the smell of cheap cosmetics. He Yan wrinkled her nose and couldn’t help but sneeze.

The copper mirror was enveloped with the film of hoarfrost she had exhaled, making the reflection in the mirror a little vague. He Yan was absentminded for a moment as she reminisced the past. She recalled the time she had first removed her male disguise. She had sat in front of the mirror, just as she did now, gazing at her own reflection and feeling like she was looking at a complete stranger.

She knew that she had been drowned in the Xu Family’s pond by the men He Wan Ru had brought, but when she opened her eyes later, she had become He Yan. Not He Yan, the real General Fei Hong and He Ru Fei’s little sister or He Yan, the wife of Xu Zhi Heng. This was He Yan, the daughter of the owner of a dilapidated hut. He Sui, the father of this body’s original owner, was a ninth-grade town gate officer without any duty.

Both had the same name—He Yan, but their statuses were totally different.

“Yan Yan, why didn’t you call me when you woke up?” A hoarse voice was heard as the portiere was lifted. A man walked in, bringing the cold wind in with him.

He Sui was a bearded, middle-aged man. He had dark skin and was square-jawed. He was large, like a bear, clumsy yet strong. His face revealed a fawning smile. When he was reassured that there was no one else in the room, he yelled: “Where the hell is Qing Mei?”

“Qing Mei went to pick herbs.” He Yan answered softly.

The burly man scratched his head and said: “Okay, then let daddy help you pour.”

The white porcelain medicine bowl was smaller than the man’s palm. The man obviously knew that, so he poured the decoction extra carefully. The room was suddenly filled with the medicine’s bitter scent. He Yan looked at the plum blossom pattern at the edge of the bowl, then set her gaze at the man’s face. This was He Yan’s father, the town gate officer, He Sui.

‘Daddy’. To He Yan, this was an unfamiliar word.

Her biological father was He Yuan Liang, the second lord of the He Family, but she called him ‘uncle’ because she had already replaced He Ru Fei at that time. In reality, her adoptive father was He Yuan Sheng, her real uncle.

He Yan was never close with her adoptive father in the first place. It became worse—it wasn’t wrong to say that it even dropped to freezing point the moment she had said that she wanted to learn martial arts. Her adoptive father only started favoring her when she gained name and fame and got praised by the emperor himself. Her adoptive father never knew what she was thinking of and wasn’t even interested in providing her with basic necessities like food and water. He Yan always thought that this was because he wasn’t her actual father, but her real father wasn’t really close to her, either. He Yan came to the conclusion that it was because ‘a daughter who’s already been married off is like spilt water’. As time passed, the little affection that remained between them faded away, and he didn’t bother to even take a look at her.

Her father figure was only a vague memory to her, compared to He Yan’s friends in the army.

He Sui had finished pouring the decoction into the bowl and carefully scooped away the residue floating on top. He blew it gently and brought it towards He Yan’s mouth to feed her.

He Yan took hold of the bowl and said: “I’ll do it myself.”

The man withdrew his hand and said, clearly awkward: “Alright.”

As smoke curled up from the decoction, He Yan stared at it with hesitation. It reminded her of He Wan Ru’s words before she had died.

“The decoction you had drunk that made you blind, was instructed to be sent to you by the elders of your family!”

The elders of the He family. Was it He Yuan Sheng? Or He Yuan Liang? Or someone else? Xu Zhi Heng definitely knew about it, and what about the others?

She recalled the day she was drowned and that cup of tea Xiao Die had given her. Who knew if this was done by someone who harbored evil intentions towards her?

Seeing He Yan holding the bowl without moving, He Sui thought that she wasn’t drinking the medicine as it was too bitter. He coaxed her with a gentle smile: “Don’t be afraid, Yan Yan. It’s not bitter, after drinking it, you will recover at a faster rate.”

He Yan didn’t wait for He Sui to finish his sentence, instead, she moved the bowl close to her mouth, and drank it all in one shot.

“Wait…” He Yan placed the empty bowl on the table before He Sui finished his sentence.

“It’s hot…” He could only continue his sentence after He Yan finished drinking.

“It’s not hot,” He Yan answered tartly.

He Sui didn’t know what to say at that moment. He only moved his mouth and finally exhorted softly:

“Rest well here, don’t be naughty and refrain yourself from running around. Daddy will be heading off to the drill fields now.” Saying this, he took the empty bowl and left.

Only when He Yan was left alone in the room, did she feel relieved. At present, she was a female and more importantly, she was acting like one. She wasn’t a spoiled young lady who had grown under the loving and protective wings of her family. Thus, this little chat had made her feel very uncomfortable.

The maid, Qing Mei, had not yet returned. He Sui didn’t earn much every month. He was just a town gate officer and had no duties assigned to him. He didn’t really have any power either and was barely able to make both ends meet with the salary he earned. The whole household was only supported by He Sui’s salary. A part of it became a maid’s earnings and the rest… it probably was in the form of He Yan’s table of cosmetics.

He Yan stood up, then walked to the door.

Her current body was soft and weak, like corneal ulcer and white jade. To her, this was something she was totally unfamiliar with. She couldn’t protect herself with it. If there was anything useful in this body, it was this pair of clear and bright eyes which helped her to see daylight again.

Thud! He Yan heard something heavy fall. She turned her head and saw a young boy unloading a pile of firewood from his shoulder.

The young boy looked as if he was around the same age as He Yan. He wore azure blue waist clothing and a pair of pants of the same color. He tied his legs with white cloth as it was more convenient for him while working. His skin was slightly dark, and his facial features were a little like He Yan’s, obviously delicate. His chin was slightly narrow, giving him a look filled with patience and determination. He seemed stubborn and arrogant.

This was He Yan’s little brother and He Sui’s youngest child, He Yun Sheng.

He Yun Sheng had visited He Yan a few times when she was bedridden. He came to give her water and move the stove, but he never uttered a word to He Yan. The relationship between these two siblings did not seem to be good, but… He Yan looked at the crudely manufactured and unfitting piece of clothing He Yun Sheng was wearing, then looked at her own clothing—a pink based blue satin skirt… she vaguely understood the situation, but it awed her at the same time.

In her original He Family, women sacrificed themselves for men and these men meant the whole world to them. However, in her present He Family, things took a different turn. They treated their own son as if he was adopted and gave every valuable item to the girl child. What in the world was wrong with this family?

He Yan stood in front of He Yun Sheng and did not move an inch. He Yun Sheng carried the pile of firewood to the eaves, then started chopping.

This family was incredibly poor, thought He Yan. There was only a maid to look after the whole family, and the only son of the family was doing a manservant’s job.

The pile of wood was right in front of He Yan. He Yun Sheng chopped it for a while, then stopped and frowned: “Please give way, you are blocking me.”

He didn’t even want to call her ‘sister’.

He Yan stayed still, neither moving away nor ridiculing him harshly like the original owner of the body always did. He Yun Sheng couldn’t help raising his head, meeting He Yan’s gaze.

# Chapter 3: I WILL SHOW YOU HOW TO CHOP

He Yun Sheng frowned and asked: “What did you say?”

He Yan stood still and repeated earnestly: “I said, you cannot chop wood like this.”

He Yun Sheng was impatient: “He Yan, you are a sick person so go and rest indoors. Don’t pick on me.”

“If you continue chopping like this, you won’t get it done until midnight.” He Yan didn’t move.

Seeing her being so obstinate and disrupting his work infuriated He Yun Sheng. The axe with which he was chopping slid from his hands and landed on the blue stone floor with a bang. He took a step forward, and growled: “If it wasn’t for you getting sick and useless, our father wouldn’t have sent the manservant away. You may not know, the money with which father paid the manservant was used for your treatment. You understand clearly that I will not get this job done until midnight, so stop bossing around since you don’t know how to chop wood, either! Oh, if you think you are so good at it, go ahead and do it yourself!”

He Yan fretted… so this household did have a manservant who was sent away because they needed the money to get her a doctor. This young boy had to do the manservant’s jobs in his stead. Seeing his little faced flushed with anger, He Yan knew he had been carrying a grudge against her for quite some time. He continued rambling on without wasting a second to catch his breath.

Yet, there were certain advantages of being poor. For example, there was no one in the courtyard to see the awkward situation between the two siblings. If it was the He or Xu Family, the maids might have already crowded to enjoy the show.

After finishing his long speech, He Yun Sheng waited for He Yan to stamp her foot and start swearing, but to his surprise, this time He Yan refrained herself from doing so. Instead, she bent down and picked up the axe he had thrown to the ground.

She was nearly pulled down by the weight of the axe and her thin wrist looked shockingly weak, as if it could not even withstand the weight.

He Yan stared at her hand and frowned slightly. This body couldn’t be used to even lift up an axe. Compared to her previous body, this one was too frail and fragile.

He Yun Sheng was stunned by her action. He asked doubtfully: “What are you doing?”

“I’ll show you how to chop,” He Yan answered.

He Yun Sheng was even more annoyed when he heard that. “Stop fooling around, you…”

A loud ‘thud’ sound interrupted his words.

He Yan had already lifted the axe and chopped a piece of wood neatly into two.

“See,” she explained gently, “It’s easy. You cannot hold near the blade because it will take more effort to chop the wood. You have to hold the axe firmly at the end of the handle, like this…”

He Yun Sheng gave her a blank stare. In an instant, his face flushed, with a voice filled with anger, he pointed his finger towards her and shouted: “You… you… you…! I know you carry ill intentions towards me! Your hand… father will definitely scold me when he sees it! He Yan, you are really malicious and treacherous!”

“Huh?” He Yan was puzzled. The next moment, a young female voice sounded, full of panic, “Miss, you’re bleeding!”

He Yan subconsciously lowered her head only to see her palm all torn up. Her heart stirred at the sight of those distinctive blood stains.

She only used an axe to chop a piece of firewood and her hand was already torn? Just how weak was this body? The eldest young miss of the He Family had never even moved a finger to work, what was she made up of, cotton and tofu?

He Yan was lost in her thoughts. The maid, Qing Mei, had rushed over to pull her inside the house.

She spoke in a hurried tone: “We should apply some medicine on it first, who knows if it will leave a scar behind…”

He Yun Sheng glared at her hatefully and left saying: “He Yan, keep being phony and it will lead you to death sooner or later.” Then, he turned and ran away.

He Yan didn’t know if she wanted to laugh or weep, throughout her previous life and until today it was really the first time someone had used the word ‘phony’ to describe her.

She felt rather strange. To a General, ‘phony’ was a distant word.

Qing Mei let He Yan’s hand rest on her knee as she applied the medicine on her palm carefully with her own fingertips. Her tears fell freely as she said: “What if you leave behind a scar? We need to think of a plan to buy some scar removal cream.”

“It’s fine.” He Yan couldn’t bear seeing a girl cry, especially a girl of around fifteen or sixteen, a beautiful girl who was younger than He Yan in her past life. She comforted her: “Let the scar be, the important thing is to recover.”

Qing Mei’s eyes were wide open; she even forgot to dry her tears. She stared at He Yan without uttering a word.

“What’s wrong? He Yan asked.

“N-Nothing.” Qing Mei wiped away her tears and stood up: “It’s fine if Miss isn’t angry about it.”

This kind of tone… He Yan looked at the table full of cosmetics and jewelry and suddenly comprehended the situation. The original eldest young miss of the He family was someone who was proud of her beauty. Her flawless skin seemed to be taken care of so well that even a small cut on it could turn the household upside down.

Did God give her such a fragile body, a body which could not withstand any suffering, to let her experience a girlish life she hadn’t in her past life? After all, she had led a manly and rough life in the past.

Qing Mei said: “Miss, let me pour you a cup of hot tea, it had just stopped raining, and you might catch a cold.”

“Wait,” He Yan stopped her, “After waking up, I seemed to have forgotten a few things…” She looked at Qing Mei and asked cautiously: “How did I get sick in the first place?

There was a manservant before, but he was sent away in exchange for the doctor. It meant that she was not sick at birth. Plus, after waking up she did not feel uncomfortable or sick anywhere. Yet, everyone in this household treated her as if she was something fragile and delicate, as if she was prone to accidents. He Yan had a strange feeling about this.

Qing Mei was scared out of her wits when she heard her question. She grabbed He Yan’s hands, her tears freefalling again: “Miss, you’ve already been upset on Fan gongzi’s account once, so please don’t do it again! Even if it’s not for you, please take your beloved father and brother into consideration.”

Fan gongzi? A man?

He Yan asked: “Who is Fan gongzi?”

“Miss, what do you mean…? Oh yes, Fan gongzi was so ruthless, he was clearly not the right match for you, it’s good for Miss to forget about him. I won’t mention Fan gongzi again, I only want Miss to lead a content life.” Qing Mei wiped her tears again after she finished talking.

This little maid really liked to cry much for no particular reason; the newbies under her command hadn’t even cried much during their first battles. Now, her maid’s clothing was already wet, if she continued to cry like this, she might even flood this place up.

“Alright.” He Yan said helplessly, “Then we shall not mention him, go and change now, your clothes are already wet.”

Qing Mei looked disbelievingly at He Yan, seeing He Yan so calm and composed, she said hesitantly: “Then I shall go change, please wait for me, I’ll be right back.” Saying this, she finally left.

The room was silent again.

He Yan extended her hand and opened her palm.

The medicine Qing Mei had applied for her was still on her palm. She looked at her slender and delicate hand in a daze. A girl’s strength was obviously lesser than that of a boy. In her past life, ever since she was young, she would slip out of the backdoor before the sunrise.

She would then climb Mount Jing Cheng Dong Huang, to reach the temple at the top where she would carry water and chop wood with the monks just to increase the strength of her hand. Her skin had torn several times the first few days, but it became better as her hand gradually gained strength. She was then able to lift two buckets of water easily and also practice shadow boxing with stones tied to her wrist.

She had to use cheap tricks to increase her strength. The process did not complete overnight, only after a long period of time was she qualified enough to fight with a man.

But now, she was back to square one. Forget about regaining everything she had lost; with this fragile and delicate body she wouldn’t even be fight the thorny dead end she was heading to.

“Then I’ll train,” He Yan told herself, “Just like the old days.” This may be a test God had given her, as a price for her rebirth. There was nothing to be afraid of.

It was only starting everything from scratch.

# Chapter 4: GOING UP THE HILL

It stopped raining the next day. The morning sun shone brightly in the sky. The blue stones in the courtyard felt warm under the sunlight, and the grass was lush and green.

At the rooster’s third call, He Yan woke up. Qing Mei was flabbergasted when she found out that He Yan was not on her bed. She looked for her everywhere and only felt relieved when she saw He Yan sitting on the stone pier in the courtyard.

“Miss, why did you wake up so early? Did you feel cold because of the thin blanket?”

“I’m fine, I just couldn’t sleep.” He Yan said.

She never had the habit of sleeping. When she had been in the army, she could never let her guard down. Every night, she had to stay alert each moment and be wary of the enemies’ raids. Plus, she had been learning the martial arts since a young age and was used to waking up herself at the roosters’ calls. After marrying to the Xu Family, she was taunted by others due to this habit. However, she started getting up late after she was blinded, because to her, there was no difference between day and night. She still woke up when the rooster cawed, but only got out of the bed when she heard the others getting up.

Or else, she would seem to be incompatible with the others.

“Where’s father?” she asked.

“Master has already left for the drill fields. Young master just woke up too. Miss, please change your clothing and have some breakfast.” After finishing the sentence, Qing Mei ran into the kitchen.

There was only one maid and the household had no shortage of work to be done. The little maid could always use a helping hand.

When He Yan arrived in the dining hall, He Yun Sheng was already seated at the table. He had just started eating.

His clothing looked no different from the one he wore the last day. He dressed like peddlers and manservants and was not in the least worried about his clothing. When he heard He Yan entering, he just glanced at her, looked away, then picked up his bowl to eat porridge.

The breakfast lain on the table consisted of some simple congee and a few side dishes. It was obvious that the He Family could not afford exquisite dishes. However, there was always a plate of light refreshments. These were specially made for He Yan by He Sui and were tasty and aromatic.

He Yan picked up her bowl to finish the congee. She finished her meal quickly, which astonished Qing Mei and He Yun Sheng. Before she was bedridden, He Yan used to be a picky eater. She refused to eat simple dishes and would only complete her meal after a long time. They couldn’t fathom what was going on with He Yan today. She had finished eating quickly and didn’t bother to immediately have the light refreshments which He Sui had specially prepared. Those dishes were solely made for He Yan and neither Qing Mei nor He Yun Sheng could touch them.

He Yun Sheng put the bowl on the table and stood up. He Yan raised her head and asked: “Where are you going?”

He Yun Sheng frowned: “What?” While he stared at her impatiently, he got a glimpse of He Yan’s palm and his stance softened.

He was sure that He Yan would complain to He Sui about her torn palm. Nothing had occurred today and it seemed He Yan didn’t drive a wedge between him and He Sui. He Yan probably did not let He Sui know about her injury.

His tone had softened as he spoke: “I’m going uphill to chop wood.”

He Yun Sheng was positive that He Yan would not be interested in what he had said. She would go back to her room to fiddle with her cosmetics, and then go out for a walk after dressing up beautifully. To his surprise, He Yan’s eyes suddenly brightened and she said cheerfully: “Really? I will tag along too.”

He Yun Sheng was dumbstruck. He wanted to tell her off, but Qing Mei forestalled him: “Miss, what are you going to do there? It had rained yesterday hence the road will not easy to trudge on and there will also be mud splattered everywhere. You might slip on it and fall down.”

“She is right.” It was rare to have a person with common sense in this household, so He Yun Sheng continued her sentence without waiting for her to finish: “Don’t go looking for trouble.”

Both He Yun Sheng and Qing Mei thought that He Yan had said this on a whim, but He Yan turned to Qing Mei and spoke: “Father will be on the drill fields all day long, and would only return at night. Qing Mei, you have so many chores to do so it might be disadvantageous for you to always follow me. He Yun Sheng,” She called out He Yun Sheng by his name causing him to shiver: “If you don’t bring me, I’ll go by myself.”

“Hey!” He Yun Sheng was instantly mad.

“Is there a third person who can take care of me in this room?” She asked slowly.

He Yun Sheng was speechless. This single sentence of He Yan’s left no room for questions. When did she become so smart? Not to mention a third person in this house, there was no one in the whole wide world who could take care of her. Their father, He Sui doted on her excessively, which made He Yan rather spoiled. She would never listen to anyone’s words, oh, maybe it would be different when it came to that Fan Gongzi.

“Just do what you want to!” He Yun Sheng was exasperated. “If you fall down anywhere and snivel at me, I won’t take you back home!”

He Yan shrugged.

He Yun Sheng stomped out of the room. He couldn’t understand why He Yan had become more and more vexing after recovering from her illness. If the old He Yan had been a bad tempered girl who was pretentious and cutesy, the present He Yan was a rogue who was even more difficult to deal with.

She really was his one and only foe!

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The road towards Mount Long Huan’s peak was rugged. The terrain was very dangerous and mostly poor people came here to chop wood and pick herbs.

There were nameless wild flowers growing by the side of the road, very appealing as they appeared in the grass. However, this wasn’t a road leading to a place where people could go for a stroll and enjoy the beauty of wildflowers. There were sharp protrusions everywhere on the road. Merely the sight of these could make one’s legs tremble.

He Yun Sheng had walked on this road many times before; he knew it wasn’t easy to go up the hill. He waited for He Yan to grumble and cry, but He Yan was mute as a fish the whole time.

He Yun Sheng couldn’t help but turn back his head. Amazingly, He Yan was not far from him, as she was almost reaching his side.

How was this possible?!

This road was already strenuous for a man to tread on, not to mention a delicately pretty girl like He Yan, who had to stop for a while to rub her knees just after covering a little distance. When did she have this stamina?

“Why are you looking at me?” He Yan was a little edgy under his keen stare, “Have we reached our destination?”

He Yun Sheng turned back his head without saying anything and continued walking.

‘It must be an act of hers; she would fall flat on her stomach any minute now!’

He Yan glanced at her legs and sighed.

The strength of these legs was really insufficient. She had only walked a stretch of road with He Yun Sheng and was already fatigued.

“We have reached.” He Yun Sheng stopped in his tracks and took down the axe tied to his waist.

There were a number of small trees there. All the wood He Yun Sheng chose were thin and small as it was more convenient for him to chop them down. He pointed his finger towards a huge rock beside He Yan, “Sit there while I work; I’ll be to chopping wood for two hours.”

“Is it here?” He Yan asked. Then, she took down the cloth sack she had been carrying.

He Yun Sheng’s mouth fell open as He Yan took out an axe from her cloth sack.

“You… y-you… w-what are you doing?” He Yun Sheng’s mind went blank. He couldn’t even speak out his sentence clearly.

He Yun Sheng had thought that He Yan was bringing a bottle of water and had wondered why she needed a huge cloth sack for that. But then, she was always this stupid, and He Yun Sheng had no idea how her mind worked. As it turned out, she had been carrying an axe the whole time?!

What happened next made He Yun Sheng feel assured that he was dreaming.

He watched as this weak sister, who usually thought that a simple teacup was too heavy for her, lifted the axe without hesitation and, with a single swing, chopped the wood perfectly into two. Her actions were neat and swift, as if she had done this job a thousand times before.

She turned her head, smiled at him, and said: “Let’s finish this job, together.”

# Chapter 5: POVERTY

He Yun Sheng wondered why he was having such a prolonged dream.

His sister followed him up the hill this morning, chopped wood, and, lastly, took out the light refreshments she hadn’t eaten at breakfast to share with him. He Yun Sheng wanted to reject at first, but the sweet fragrance had already crept into his nose. Seeing He Yan lowering her head to bite her own, he also reached out his hand to grab the one she had offered him.

He took a bite; his taste buds had never experienced such a sweet flavor. He Yan was never the generous type and had kept all good things to herself.

Seeing that he was delighted to have it, He Yan put the rest of the dish in his hands and said: “I’m full. You can eat the rest.”

He Yun Sheng was awestruck.

There were only two children in the He Family. When he was a youth, He Sui used to be a guard who delivered stuff to Jing Cheng Capital. He had rescued the daughter of a scholar from the cruel hands of bandits. She was the scholar’s only daughter and He Sui was an orphan. To show his gratitude, the scholar offered his daughter’s hand to He Sui.

The scholar and his wife passed away due to an epidemic. He Furen was depressed and did not last long. She died of grief when He Yun Sheng was only three, leaving He Sui and his children behind.

He Sui and his wife had been deeply in love. He Yan was the miniature form of He Furen. Maybe it was because of this, He Sui favored He Yan. Even though the He Family wasn’t wealthy, He Sui tried his best to fulfill all of He Yan’s wishes. Over time, He Yan became more spoiled and snobbish; at least that was what He Yun Sheng believed.

However, after she recovered from her sickness, her actions became incomprehensible; He Yun Sheng didn’t know how to face her anymore.

“You come up here to chop wood every day?” He Yan asked him, “What do you do in the afternoon? Don’t you go to school?”

He Yun Sheng was just a year younger than He Yan. He was fifteen this year, and the children at this age ought to be attending school.

“After I return home, I make Da Nai[1](https://phoenixwalktranslations.com/rebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-5-poverty/#1) cakes and sell it under the shed after noon. Forget about school,” He Yun Sheng said with a wave of his hand, “You already know that our family isn’t wealthy. I have some knowledge in a few subjects and I am not bent on learning the martial arts.”

Even though he spoke carelessly, He Yan could clearly see the regret and desire he tried so desperately to hide from her in his eyes.

She paused and then asked: “What do you plan to do in the future?”

“What are you asking this for?” He Yun Sheng asked doubtfully, but he answered He Yan’s question after a moment, “I go to the drill fields every day. I can become a part of the backup armies of the town after I pass the tests in the future. In time, I’ll get promoted to an officer rank. At that time, I can earn money.”

“That’s it? An officer without any duties?” He Yan smiled, “I thought you wanted to do something worthwhile.”

“What can I do?” He Yun Sheng quipped: “You want me to become someone like General Fei Hong? Although we have the same surnames, he’s in a much higher level compared to us.”

Hearing this name come out from He Yun Sheng’s mouth all of the sudden, He Yan was stunned. She was silent for a while before asking: “You know General Fei Hong?”

“Of course I do! Who in Da Wei doesn’t? General Fei Hong brought peace to Xi Qiang and General Feng Yun stopped the barbarians. Since then, no one dared to attack our country, Da Wei! The chivalry, fame, and bravery of the two young men! If I could be like one of them, it’s even worth dying for.”

“Pfft!”

He Yun Sheng was exasperated: “What are you laughing for?”

“But someone who only chops wood and sells desserts can’t be like them. General Fei Hong and General Feng Yun did not succeed by simply going to the drill fields.”

“I know that.” He Yun Sheng’s face was red, “But I…”

Which young man does not desire to succeed? He Yun Sheng was a hot-blooded youth. Living a pitiful life such as this was truly holding him back.

He Yan said: “Starting tomorrow, I’ll follow you uphill to chop wood and sell desserts.”

“What?” He Yun Sheng jumped up from the stone, “He Yan, are you out of your mind?”

He could understand that what happened today was due to a sudden whim of hers, but doing this every day… Did He Yan spoil her brain after getting sick?

Not waiting for He Yun Sheng to talk again, He Yan stood up and brushed away the dust on her: “Since we’re done eating, we should start working. Time is money, brother.”

He Yun Sheng: “…”

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After the spring rain, it was bright and sunny for the next ten days.

Qing Mei had something bothering her lately. Back then, Miss He had always commanded her to do this and that, making Qing Mei unable to leave her side, but now… she couldn’t even find a trace of He Yan now.

He Yan went out with He Yun Sheng in the day; when Qing Mei wanted to serve her and help her bathe at night, she would dismiss her straight away. The only help the miss needed from her was to comb her hair every morning.

Qing Mei was worried, since Miss doesn’t need her anymore, would she be like the other manservant sent away by He Sui, if this continues?

Another person who had something in mind is He Yun Sheng.

For more than a month, He Yan had followed him to chop wood at Mount Long Huan, and she even got up earlier than him. Not to say, she also tied sandbags on both her hands and legs while climbing the mountain. He Yun Sheng weighed the sandbag secretly, it was definitely very heavy. He wondered why He Yan brought such things up the hill to chop wood every day.

She never once complained, as if she never got tired. However, He Yun Sheng had seen her palm, exposing her delicate skin that was torn several times. She never paid attention to her wounds and just wrapped white cloth around them.

The benefits of doing this were obvious. Because, after half a month, He Yan could walk and chop wood faster than him. He Yun Sheng wondered if those sandbags were magical. If yes, should he secretly tie two up?

With two people chopping wood, the work was completed quickly. With the extra time, both of them could make more cakes. Well, He Yan was a girl, it wasn’t advantageous for her to show her face at work. He Yun Sheng alerted her about this, but He Yan didn’t seem to mind. He Yun Sheng’s head ached with frustration; if He Sui became aware of the fact that He Yan went up the hill to chop wood and sell cakes outside with him, he would definitely be subject to whiplashes.

Fortunately, He Sui didn’t know.

He Sui not only did not know about it, but also seemed to be happy every day, because his son and daughter, who usually were apprehensive about each other, had become closer these days. Because of this, he got the chance to sit together, eat, and chat with them a little. He Sui was so satisfied with it that he became more affable towards the new troupes on the drill field, because, well, he had a harmonious family.

Right now, He Yan was sitting in front of her dressing table.

Qing Mei gave her veiled looks.

Ever since He Yan recovered, she didn’t like looking at the mirror or fiddling with her cosmetics. Now she was suddenly interested in them, which made Qing Mei nervous. The household experienced financially tough times now, if He Yan wanted to buy a new lipstick at this time, there was not enough money.

He Yan played with the fragrance powder and hair balm on the table, her head aching a bit. These things had been used before, so they couldn’t be sold to earn money. She searched through her belongings again and found some hair pins and jewelry.

They were all made of silver, the color more ordinary compared to the ones she owned in the Xu Family, but there was no other way now.

She took out all the jewelry she found and handed them to Qing Mei.

“Pawn these in a pawn shop; these are tough times, not even a single penny should go to waste.”

Qing Mei’s eyes widened: “But… but…”

“We are poor now.” He Yan explained to her with sincerity, “We can’t eat jewelry.”

She had to pawn her jewelry and get some money. It would be better to obtain enough money for He Yun Sheng to study in a school.

Since she occupied the body of the young miss of the He family, she at least needed to do something for her family. He Yan could only satisfy her own wishes after helping the He family out of their misery.

For example, settling an old score.

[1](https://phoenixwalktranslations.com/rebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-5-poverty/#s1) Da Nai – A kind of dessert from the Song Dynasty.

# Chapter 6: DERISION

That day, before they went out to work, He Yun Sheng asked: “Why did you wake up so late today? We won’t be able to find good spots later.”

“I had things to do.” He Yan answered: “It’s fine if we don’t get a good spot, our cakes are good enough.”

He Yun Sheng was rendered speechless.

For him, talking to He Yan was like punching cotton, you couldn’t express your anger even if you wanted to. He Yan wasn’t easy to provoke and had a carefree attitude. He Yun Sheng couldn’t tell if she was being optimistic or naïve. It had been a long time since He Yun Sheng saw He Yan feel distressed about something.

The shed was put up at the western part of the town where vendors did their various businesses. It was located in front of the biggest restaurant in Jing Cheng, Restaurant Zui Yu. There were a number of people and the vendors were making profits. However, the shed wasn’t very big, therefore, they had to go early to get a good spot that could attract the attention of the passersby.

He Yun Sheng took out the Da Nai cakes from the wooden utensil.

The Da Nai cake was a popular dessert. Fresh plums without skin and seeds were used to make this cake. These white plums were first scalded and mixed with licorice soup briefly. Then, the gaps were filled with honey, walnuts, olive, pine nuts and pumpkin seeds. Lastly, the ingredients were steamed. The cake was generally sweet but also tasted a little sour. These cakes were not very expensive and were a favorite among the commoners. By selling Da Nai cakes, He Yun Sheng was able to contribute to the income of the He family.

When the summer sun shone and the weather was pleasant, people would stop to buy one or two cakes from time to time. By the sunset, they could finish selling the cakes.

Watching He Yun Sheng work, He Yan had to admit that He Yun Sheng was very capable. It reminded her of those new recruits in the army. These young men who joined the army usually were from poor families. The rich families were unwilling to let their children fight in the battlefield. The poor people joined the army only to feed themselves and their families. They had to do something to survive.

Although she hailed from a noble family, she lived that way.

“Hey, give me one… Isn’t this Miss He?” A voice interrupted He Yan’s train of thoughts.

He Yan looked up to see a man with a long face standing in front of her. His hair was combed neatly and sparkled in the sunlight. His facial features were ugly and repulsive. In his nondescript white robes, he looked rather sly. He raised his hand wanting to hold He Yan’s shoulder, but she dodged away.

The man looked disappointed, but his expression was cheerful when he said: “It has been a while, Miss He. I was wondering why you didn’t come out of your house these days. So it seems you are busy selling cakes with your brother… Isn’t it tiring to do such things, Miss He?”

He talked as if he and He Yan were best friends.

He Yan was puzzled, so she looked at He Yun Sheng. He Yun Sheng was furious and snapped: “Wang Jiu Gui! Leave my sister alone!”

“You little brat, your sister doesn’t mind it, what are you nagging about?!” After finishing his words, the guy called Wang Jiu Gui approached He Yan again with a smile, took something out from his sleeves, and gave it to He Yan: “Young Miss He, I’ve been having fond dreams about you lately. See, I bought a rouge not long ago to gift you. Since I happened to meet you here today, I’m giving it to you now. And so, do I have the pleasure to invite you for a walk by the Si Waterfront?”

He looked like a loser, but ironically acted like a handsome guy, so much that He Yan wanted to laugh. She had met many people in her past life, both good and bad, but someone who dared to mock her in public? None.

“I want to sell cakes, so I can’t go for a walk with you.” He Yan politely declined, “And this rouge, please give it to someone else.”

Wang Jiu Gui was stunned.

He lived on the same street as the He Family. At first, others dared not provoke He Yan as she was the daughter of a government official. However, He Yan was never satisfied of her lifestyle and coveted bigger things. Usually when he bought her cosmetics, she would coquettishly call him “Brother Jiu Gui”, but now she made him lose face in front of everybody.

Wang Jiu Gui felt that he was being disgraced, so his smile wasn’t sincere anymore: “Is Miss He still thinking about Fan gongzi? Fan gongzi is getting married soon…”

“Shut up!” Before Wang Jiu Gui could finish his sentence, he got a tight slap and fell on the ground with a ‘thud’ sound.

A young boy of fifteen was like a half-grown calf, full of power. Wang Jiu Gui’s body was weak because of overindulging himself in wine and women, so how could he be He Yun Sheng’s opponent? His face hurt like hell and his whole body was hot with embarrassment. He stood up after scratching and scrambling on the floor, and then looked at He Yan. She didn’t seem to consider apologizing to him, and even watched the whole seen unfold, full of interest. Anger welled up inside him.

“You two…” He pointed a trembling finger towards the duo.

He Yun Sheng shielded He Yan, blocking her from his sight and sneered: “What’s with us?”

Wang Jiu Gui didn’t dare to step forward, he mumbled: Didn’t these two have a bad relationship? He Yan usually complained about He Yun Sheng to him while He Yun Sheng never cared about He Yan, why are these two together today? And why did He Yun Sheng stand up for He Yan?

“You two wait and watch!” He stomped his foot and ran away.

The crowd dispersed and the shed was silent again. He Yun Sheng set up the stalls with a gloomy face, not saying a word.

He Yan peeked at him.

“What are you looking at?” He Yun Sheng asked peevishly.

“The punch you did just now was not bad.” He Yan said pensively, “The only problem is, your legs under the belt are unstable, your basics aren’t strong enough and you need to train yourself on standing on tiptoes and clenching your buttocks.”

“Shush!” He Yun Sheng didn’t want to continue talking about it anymore, “You’re not a martial arts officer.”

He Yan looked at He Yun Sheng; he was talented and could be molded to a good soldier. Maybe it was because he did heavy chores since he was a kid. Needless to say, he was much better compared to the young masters of the ‘He Family’.

He shouldn’t be here selling Da Nai cakes, he ought to go to school and train himself in the martial arts hall.

“Then I’ll change the topic, who is Fan gongzi?”

He Yun Sheng slammed his fist on the table and glared at her, “You dare to talk about it?”

“What’s with Fan gongzi?” He Yan gave him a puzzled glance.

Talking about ‘Fan gongzi’ made He Yun Sheng furious. “Why? If it wasn’t because of him deceiving you, how would you have been fooled by him? That playboy seduces women all around and only you will believe in him. When you heard that he was getting married, you went on a hunger strike, wanting to die for him. But him? He’s still busy marrying a new girl! Look at you, you’ve become the joke of Jing Cheng. Now you’re still mentioning him? Do you want to drive me mad?!”

He Yan got the rough idea about the whole situation just through these few words.

The eldest miss of the He family was a spoiled brat. Her heart was higher than the sky, how could she be willing to live as a lowlife? She wanted to marry to a noble family and become a noble herself. One day, she met a young man from a rich family when she was out for a walk, and the two of them secretly fell in love with each other. However, He Yan’s love for him was unrequited and the young man just played with her feelings. A rich young man would never marry a daughter of a non-duty officer.

Fan gongzi’s family had found him a partner from a rich family; they would be a perfect match. But would Miss He give up on him that easily? She went to his house to demand an explanation, but was swept out immediately. She couldn’t accept it and went on a hunger strike. As she was dying, He Yan woke up and replaced the eldest miss of the He family.

No wonder everyone in He Family treated her with extra care after she woke up; they might have thought that she would try to commit suicide again.

He Yun Sheng was still babbling about her, saying she was a fool, but he didn’t know his real sister was not in this world anymore. He Yan felt regret and disappointment for the previous Miss He. Her only mistake was that she fell in love with a man who deceived her and sacrificed her life for him. One’s life is valuable and should not be wasted for men like him. Plus, the one who cheated her lived happily although she passed away, leaving the ones who truly loved her in pain.

Inflicting pain on her loved ones and bringing happiness to her enemies… what did one achieve by doing this? Death.

Her experience was similar to Miss He’s; both of them were cheated and betrayed by others. However, she and the Eldest He Miss were different. He Yuan Sheng, He Yuan Liang, He Ru Fei and Xu Zhi Heng and even He Wan Ru… She would find them one by one and get back all the things she had lost because of them.

She poured her blood, sweat, and tears to attain this goal.

Every morning, she tied sandbags to her limbs and climbed the mountain to get back her power. She sold cakes in the afternoon to find out news about the He and Xu families from various people.

This was what the townsfolk said: The blind He Furen drowned to death because of an accident, Master Xu was so aggrieved that he became very sick. Old He Master was very sad about this ordeal and his hair turned white in a night. General Fei Hong loved his sister very much so he managed her funeral himself and it was held for three days and three nights.

This news may have been real or fake but they entered He Yan’s ears like snowflakes and she only smiled.

The truth was hidden and He Yan had to reveal it. To accomplish that, first, she must survive.

# Chapter 7: AGITATION

At night, the wind blew in through the gaps of the windows, making the flame of the candle sway slightly. The shadow on the wall reeled right and left due to the candle. He Yan looked at the little bit of money in front of her and asked: “This is all?”

“I had already asked the shopkeeper to give me more money,” Qing Mei answered with difficulty: “But the shopkeeper said that he couldn’t give more money for those jewelry.”

He Yan nodded, “You can go now.”

Qing Mei left.

He Yan picked up the little amount of money bit by bit and put them in her palm. Looking at the two broken bits of silver, she felt as if her heart was breaking together with it.

When she was in previous He Family, money was never a problem. Even if she was in short of money, she could simply pawn her jewelry and jade pendants to get a huge sum. There was no need of money when she was in the battlefield. When she came back to Jing Chen, she was rewarded a large sum of money and valuables by the emperor. This amount was enough to fill up a few of He family’s courtyards.

Just a little bit of General Fei Hong’s reward would help the He family come out of its crises. But she could never go back to her previous He family.

He Yan heaved a deep sigh. She finally understood the meaning of the saying: “A penny beats a hero”.

Nothing could replace money. He Yan also wanted to go to the drill fields. She could strengthen her body a little by climbing the hill, but that was not enough. If she wanted to really become as strong as her previous self, she needed to engage in direct combat with people, shoot arrows, and ride horses. However, He Yan was unsure if He Sui, who loved his daughter more than his life, would agree to this.

She blew off the candle and went to bed. No matter what, she had to leave tomorrow.

\*

The next day, after chopping wood and going back home, He Yun Sheng planned to sell cakes.

He Yan watched He Yun Sheng fill the bamboo utensils with cakes. She asked: “Are you sure you’ll finish selling all these cakes?”

“The weather is warm and sunny and the market is bustling.” He Yun Sheng answered: “We will finish selling in a short amount of time.”

He Yun Sheng worked hard for his family. His knowledge on business seemed awe-inspiring to He Yan, so she patted his shoulder and said: “Then let’s go.”

He Yun Sheng’s body stiffened. He Yan’s actions, it was really… manly.

It was early when they reached the shed, hence there weren’t many vendors. The two of them found a good spot near the streets and started to take out the Da Nai cakes one by one.

It was early April, the warm sensation of summer slowly vanished as the sun gradually went down. The Da Nai cakes tasted both sweet and sour and also had the pleasant fragrance of plums. It was the best time to have these cakes. Just as He Yun Sheng predicted, the business was going well. He Yun Sheng wrapped the cakes while He Yan dealt with the transactions. They were as busy as bees when, all of a sudden, a bunch of men burst in with Wang Jiu Gui in the lead.

Wang Jiu Gui slammed his fist hard on the table. The crowd moved back, not wanting to get involved in this scenario.

He Yun Sheng was fearless and snapped: “What are you doing?”

“What am I doing?” Wang Jiu Gui snorted, “You thought I would let the matter go after you beat me up yesterday?”

He Yun Sheng rolled up his sleeves. His face was cold as he said: “You want to fight? I’m right here.”

“Bastard, you got some guts!” Wang Jiu Gui took a step back. The people who were crowded behind him advised He Yun Sheng, “Young man, don’t be too rampant!”

He Yun Sheng didn’t bother to move. At the same time, He Yan yelled: “Stop!”

He Yun Sheng and Wang Jiu Gui both turned to He Yan.

Seeing He Yan, Wang Jiu Gui smiled and said: “This little kid is immature, but since he’s your brother, I’ll give him some respect. If Miss He is willing to accompany me for a short walk, we would stop this dispute right here.”

“I see, your filthy mouth can’t even utter decent language!” He Yun Sheng was furious.

“Wait a minute.” He Yan gripped He Yun Sheng’s hand. He Yun Sheng wanted to wrench his hand from her grasp, but he couldn’t do it. Even though he tried hard, his wrist remained in her firm grasp. He Yun Sheng was startled, when did He Yan gain so much strength?

“If you have anything to talk about, don’t do it here. You’ll scare the people.” He Yan said lightly: “Let’s talk there.” She pointed far away, to a deep alley near Restaurant Zui Yu.

“NO!”

“Alright!”

He Yun Sheng and Wang Jiu Gui yelled at the same time.

He Yun Sheng spoke anxiously: “You’re a girl, how could you go with them… These people are thugs!”

Wang Jiu Gui smiled: “It seems like Miss He is more sensible than you. Let’s go, I even brought a present for you, Miss He…”

He Yun Sheng wanted to stop her, but He Yan suddenly whispered in his ears: “Do you think chopping wood every day on the hills won’t reap us any benefits? Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I’ll be back after a cup of tea’s time.”

The young girl’s voice was soft and gentle, with a faint smile in it. He Yun Sheng was stunned as he watched He Yan following Wang Jiu Gui and his cronies.

He Yun Sheng wanted to go after her, but he stopped in his tracks as he remembered what He Yan had told him.

This time, he would believe her. A cup of tea’s time. If she did not return by then, he would go look for her.

At the same time, He Yan and Wang Jiu Gui walked towards the alley.

Above the alley was Restaurant Zui Yu’s wine shop. They could faintly hear the melodious music coming from the shop. He Yan had been looking forward to going to that place for a long time, but she couldn’t do it. After she had come back to the capital, she never got a chance to visit. In the eyes of the populace, she was a girl and was forbidden to go to such places.

“Sister He,” Wang Jiu Gui approached her with a hippie smile, “What did you want to tell me?”

“My brother.”

“He shaoye\*?” Wang Jiu Gui was taken aback, but he quickly regained his composure and smiled brightly. With a wave of his hand, he said, “I won’t do anything to him, you know that.” He then proceeded to take out a blue colored powder box and extended his hand to caress He Yan’s face, “You’re the only one in my heart, and we’ll be a family in the future…”

\*shaoye (少爷): young master

A piercing scream escaped from his mouth before Wang Jiu Gui could finish his words.

Inside Restaurant Zui Yu, the strings of the musical instruments stopped for a second. This created a disarray of musical notes, which sounded like a scratch on a beautiful jade piece. Someone asked with curiosity: “What’s that sound?”

The edge of gauze curtain was lifted up by a fan handle. The tea cup was delicate, but the slender fingers that held it were way more delicate.

He Yan released her hand. Wang Jiu Gui’s arm fell nimbly at his side and his face was filled with horror. He Yan smiled slightly, then raised her arm. That blue colored powder box hit Wang Jiu Gui’s head and his face was covered with white powder.

“Thanks for your gift, but I happen to be allergic to cheap powders. Remember, don’t give me these things next time.”

“Bitch! Beat her up!” Wang Jiu Gui howled in pain but did not hesitate to make the men behind him take a move.

The young lady heard his words and smiled, as though she had heard some joke. Her laughter was as crisp as the mountain spring. She seemed to be jovial as the breeze blew her skirt. She had jet-black hair and skin as pale as snow—coupled with her large and bright apricot eyes, she merely looked like an attractive young lady out for a walk.

But the words she uttered sent shivers down Wang Jiu Gui’s spine.

She rubbed her wrist and smiled slightly: “You better not regret it.”

# Chapter 8: LE TONG, THE GAMBLING HOUSE

Wang Jiu Gui wondered if he was in his right senses. He pinched his thigh with great force, and then yelped ‘ouch’ out of pain.

It didn’t seem like a dream.

But if this wasn’t a dream, how could he explain all this?

In a short time, the men he had brought were scattered on the ground. The initiator walked to the stone steps while brushing off the dust on her clothes. Wang Jiu Gui looked at her incredulously. He Yan turned to him, her eyes bright and clear, making the hair on his body stand on end.

He had never seen He Yan acting so high and mighty.

He Yan never behaved this way. She was beautiful, mean and rather vain, obsessed in gaining advantages from others through unfair methods. A girl like her was a common sight in Jing Cheng Capital. These kinds of girls aimed for a higher rank in society but never managed to achieve it. The fortunate girls could enter rich households as concubines, while the unfortunate ones could only marry commoners and lead plaintive lives. He Sui raised his daughter like a rich miss of a noble household. Wang Jiu Gui knew for a fact that He Yan had never touched sharp and pointed objects in her life. She may have played musical instruments or painted pictures, but her delicate hands had never beaten up people like this.

Yet, just now, Wang Jiu Gui witnessed how this pair of hands clenched into fists and threw a strong man to the ground with a single punch. He recollected how he howled in pain when He Yan had caught his wrist. Her fingers were sharper than an axe.

Wang Jiu Gui desperately wanted to sob.

Before he could even think of a way to beg for mercy, that young girl walked towards him.

“Grandma! Have mercy on me!” His rational thoughts vanished into thin air, and Wang Jiu Gui blurted out: “I failed to use my eyes, please be generous and forgive me!”

“From this day forth, don’t give me any presents.” He Yan said gently, “I don’t like them.”

“Alright! Alright! Alright!” Wang Jiu Gui said ‘alright’ more than once, afraid that He Yan wouldn’t believe him. He added: “Is there anything you want me to buy for you?”

“There is no need for that. Haven’t you heard the saying ‘sow nothing, reap nothing’?” He Yan smiled. “We are neighbors. I would appreciate if you don’t try to pull any more pranks.”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Wang Jiu Gui answered gratefully.

“However, I have something to ask of you.” He Yan said.

After a while, He Yan left the messy alley with a light heart as the burly men on the ground moaned in pain. She walked away quickly, not knowing that after she left, someone from one of the floors of Restaurant Zui Yu released the fan on his hand, covering the messy place below with gauze curtain.

A man with an enthusiastic voice laced with laughter said, “When did the girls in Jing Cheng become so brave and fierce? Uncle, is this the reason why you neither want to make an engagement nor get married soon?”

His question wasn’t answered.

That person pressed on, “Uncle, do you want me to find out which family that young girl belongs to? If she’s strong enough, you could take her in as a female guard under you. Late at night, she could also accompany you…”

Someone’s fingertip lightly tapped on the table and sent a tea cup lid flying accurately into his mouth with a ‘swoosh’, rendering him speechless.

“Hmm, hmmmm—” That person revolted unwillingly.

“If you talk one more word of nonsense again, I’ll throw you down from here.” A lazy, unconcerned voice stopped his counterpart from making any complaints.

The place was silent again.

The sound of strings plucking the song ‘Liu Guang’ flowed throughout the room, covering the spring scenery outside the window. They continued drinking tea. Someone mumbled the word ‘stingy’, but the notes of the music soon overlapped his voice.

\*

He Yun Sheng was relieved to see He Yan returning without a scratch.

“Are you alright? Where are Wang Jiu Gui and his men?” He Yun Sheng asked, as he hadn’t caught a glimpse of Wang Jiu Gui.

“I cleared the misunderstandings by reasoning and enlightened them with my affection, hence they left the place. They informed me that they would come to apologize another day and would not commit such atrocities ever again.”

He Yun Sheng was not fully convinced.

If Wang Jiu Gui could be persuaded merely by reasoning, he wouldn’t be called Wang Jiu Gui. Yet, He Yan didn’t seem to want to continue talking about it. She had returned safely and soundly, so He Yun Sheng didn’t give it much thought. He was only a young boy, after all.

At night, after having dinner, He Yan pulled He Yun Sheng aside just as he was about to go to sleep.

“What?” He Yun Sheng was slightly annoyed.

“Do you have any clean clothes?” He Yan asked.

He Yun Sheng was momentarily confused.

“I just want to check if there are any clothes to be mended.” He Yan explained, “I’ll sew them for you tonight.”

He Yun Sheng’s face grew pale with disbelief.

Since the day he was born, He Yan had never told him that she wanted to help him mend his clothes. Instantly, an unfamiliar feeling of warmth spread through his heart. He hesitated before asking: “Have you ever touched a needle or thread?”

He knew very well that He Yan had no skill in needlework. This was handled by Qing Mei.

“You’re looking down on me,” He Yan said.

“Of course, I am. How could I not?” He Yun Sheng replied tartly.

He Yan slightly pushed him: “Won’t you bring your clothes to me? Come on…”

He Yun Sheng brought a pile of clothes, just as he was told. He Yan grabbed all of them and was about to head over to her room when she heard He Yun Sheng’s hesitant voice: “Just let Qing Mei sew those clothes.”

“How good is Qing Mei be compared to me? Go to bed, you have to wake up early tomorrow.” He Yan said.

After dismissing He Yun Sheng, He Yan went to her room to select a few pieces of clothes. She finally found a round collar with narrow sleeves and a maroon-colored long coat. He Sui clearly spent most of his earnings for his daughter, leaving He Yun Sheng with cotton and breeches. Only this long coat seemed proper, even though it seemed to have been previously worn by others, its color faded.

Her build was similar to He Yun Sheng’s, therefore, his clothes fit her perfectly. She then proceeded to comb her hair to a man bun and slid in a stick she had plucked from outside. She painted her skin darker and drew her eyebrows to make them thicker. He Yan looked at the mirror, which reflected the figure of a youthful, young boy.

He Yan was an expert cross-dresser in her previous life. She was sure that her secret hadn’t leaked in the past few years. She had no problem disguising herself as a boy in her current life, either. If she had proper clothes, she could have easily dressed herself as a handsome young man. In these flimsy clothes, she looked like a young master from a declining noble family.

She paced back and forth in the room and only sneaked out to the courtyard once she was confident about her disguise. She leaped with agility along the walls and walked to the streets.

Jing Chen Capital had no curfew at night, and the streets were rather lively and bustling. He Yan pranced through the brightly lit places, eagerly listening to the tunes drifting from the luxury boats and the shouts of vendors. Spring was in the air, and this night view signified prosperity.

She had not been able to go for an outing from the moment He Ru Fei returned to the He Family. She then married to the Xu Family, consequently losing her eyesight.

Such picturesque sceneries, full of life and activity, had moved further and further away from her in her past life. But tonight, as the cool wind blew from the lake, she regained all of them back. She was free again.

She was truly grateful to God for providing her with another opportunity.

Not far away from Jing Cheng’s Restaurant Zui Yu, outside Ming Guan, girls who were as tender and as beautiful as flowers were busy receiving customers.

This wasn’t a place for nobles to drink and dine. This was the largest and the most popular gambling house in Jing Cheng, Le Tong.

He Yan’s footsteps stopped in front of Le Tong, the great gambling house.

# Chapter 9: DICE

At the doorway of the Gambling House, a girl wearing a flower hairpin stopped He Yan and sweetly spoke: “Gongzi, this is a gambling house.”

“I know.” He Yan nodded, slid out a broken piece of silver from her sleeve, and shook it in front of the girl’s face, “I’m here to gamble.”

The girl was reluctant, but He Yan already marched inside before she could even utter a response.

Outside the casino, girls known as ‘gambling prostitutes’ stood to usher people in. Those who came to Le Tong Gambling House were mostly wealthy, and these girls could easily identify people’s status by their silvers’ worth. Those that looked lowly were asked to leave. Firstly, the poor people gambling inside weren’t pleasing to the eyes and sullied the embroidered carpets. Secondly, they cared too much about their silver that they were stubbornly intent on winning. Once they lost, they wailed and howled, insisting to repudiate their debts, hampering the rich people’s interest to gamble.

He Yan was obviously not from a rich family just based on her worn-out clothes. However, her persistence to enter made the gambling prostitute helpless.

Noise and shouting surfaced from within, and everyone’s faces were red. The people who won were satisfied, while those who lost were unwilling and tossed out stacks of money, yelling: “Again!”

As He Yan roamed around, she thought: it was not a lie when people said that gambling houses and whorehouses were money-squandering establishments.

Earlier, after teaching Wang Jiu Gui a lesson, she had asked him which gambling house was the biggest in Jing Cheng. A street thug like Wang Jiu Gui was naturally well-informed. As expected, Wang Jiu Gui answered: Le Tong Gambling House.

He Yan had never been to a gambling house. Before joining Fu Yue Army, her special identity had hindered her from traveling around, much less visiting a gambling house crowded with people. After joining Fu Yue Army, winning battles, and returning to Jing Cheng, He Ru Fei had reappeared. Her identity as the daughter of the He Family’s second branch was restored, which rendered it even more impossible for her to explore such places. Thus, where gambling houses were located, she had no knowledge of. This was her first time.

Nearly everything was in Le Tong Gambling House: pai gow poker, bouncing chess, Chinese chess, fighting grass, fighting cock… they all dazzled her. In her heart, she was excited but also regretful. A pity she had no idea how to play any of those.

Someone was guessing dice. He placed the dice into a bowl and guessed the dice point. This game was the easiest and had the most onlookers and participants. A huge amount of money streamed down after each game, dazzling He Yan’s eyes. Her mouth curled into a smile.

The He Family was very poor, but He Yun Sheng needed to go to school and train martial arts. The jewelry He Yan had pawned didn’t amount to much, so she was momentarily unable to afford a private tutor. Even though they made and sold Da Nai cakes daily, saving up adequate amount of silver would still take a long time. So, He Yan decided to test her luck at a gambling house, earning bit by bit. Although quite risky, at the moment, she couldn’t care less.

“Hey brother, why are you blocking us? Don’t just stand there if you ain’t gambling.” The surrounding people pushed He Yan around, their eyes laced with disdain.

What was the point of a poor person coming to a casino? Wasn’t it better to use his money to buy new clothes instead? Ugh, it truly provoked disgust.

He Yan could only reply: “Gamble.”

The people around donned on gold or silver—they were either wealthy or noble. The sudden appearance of a poor young boy had stolen their attention. He Yan fished out the only two silver pieces from her sleeve and put them on the table.

Someone ridiculed: “Little kid, you better think it through. This isn’t a play. I see you have no other money with you, so don’t gamble, or you’ll cry when you lose. Others won’t give back your money!”

This kind of situation was a common occurrence. Gambling was addictive—the more you lost, the more you gambled; and the more you gambled, the more you lost. After suffering continuous losses, some would regret, especially after using their land and family to pay off debts. If they failed to pay, workers of Le Tong Gambling House would throw them out.

They gazed at He Yan with pity. Poor people in Le Tong Gambling House would never become wealthy.

He Yan smiled slightly: “It’s fine, it’s just a play.”

The people laughed loudly. Whether their laughter contained amusement or mockery, no one knew.

The dice was put in the bowl and inverted. The dealer shook it left and right, the rattling of the dice crisp and clear. The sound was like a melody amidst the crowd’s lively chatter, with men’s rough voices resurfacing vaguely from time to time.

It reminded He Yan of those years in the army.

Joining the army—from a low grade soldier to lieutenant general, and then from a lieutenant general to a general—she had gained everything with her flesh and blood, with no aid from the He Family.

It was bitter and cold at the border, and there was no entertainment. The men in the army couldn’t stand it and started gambling in secret.

He Yan would always punish them with the army law, but she really had no way of dealing with the jubilation that occurred behind her back. He Yan was helpless about this and thus created a rule: they couldn’t gamble with money, but they could use other things like a chicken leg, a piece of solid food, or fur.

They never had the intention to gamble, but the boredom was unbearable. It was their only form of entertainment when they weren’t either training or fighting on the battlefield. He Yan didn’t want to deprive them from it, and she was eventually enticed to join them. Sometimes, when He Yan had the interest, she would gamble once or twice, but lost badly every time.

She nearly lost every little bit of her things, but she wasn’t mad. It was just that people were proficient in different fields, and not everyone was good at gambling.

The crispy sound of the dice stopped, and the dealer slammed the bowl down and looked at her.

“Big,” He Yan said.

“Open——”

The bowl was opened. Two dice lay silently on the table, making everyone hold their breaths. They eyed the dice. Two of them, one number five, and one six. It was indeed big.

The people were slightly astonished. After a moment, the guy who ridiculed He Yan guffawed: “You are in good luck! Go take these money and buy some new clothes.”

A few silver pieces were pushed toward He Yan.

He Yan pushed them back.

People looked at her.

“Again,” she smiled.

“Brother, you better stop when you earn. It’s already quite good to win once.” This was a kind advice.

Someone couldn’t stand it and said: “Hey, you’re quite arrogant, little kid!”

“He really thinks he’ll always be that lucky? Hahaha, kids are naive!”

Voices of ridicule, persuasion, and mockery rang in her ears from all directions, but He Yan’s gaze remained fixed on the two dice.

He Yun Sheng needed to attend school and train martial arts with a private tutor. Qing Mei couldn’t finish all the work by herself, so the He Family had to hire a manservant. After some time, the rainy season would come, and the roof at the He residence was short of a few tiles, so leaking would be inevitable… they desperately needed money.

She intended to collect news about Xu Zhi Heng and He Ru Fei, which also required money.

Money, it didn’t have to be a lot, just enough, but also not too little. Otherwise, when the urgency arose, it would be really difficult.

“You sure?” The middle-aged man who shook the dice soothed his beard, his smile kind and gentle.

He Yan returned a polite smile.

“Again.”

# Chapter 10: THE BENEFITS OF BEING BLIND

A huge amount of money was laid on the table. Not long after, someone deposited their jade pendant on the pile. He Yan stood out as a youthful lad who had stolen the attention of onlookers, and the place was soon crowded by merry-making people.

“Big.”

“Open——”

“Gongzi, please choose.”

“Small.”

“Open——”

“Again.”

“Open——”

“Again.”

“Open——”

“Again.”

“Open——”

A huge pile of coins and jewelry were stacked in front of He Yan. Those who laughed at her minutes ago simultaneously shut their mouths, as they could now tell that she wasn’t a mere rookie at gambling. Had it not been for Le Tong’s cast-iron reputation, people would have come to the conclusion that this situation was a scam she and the dealer had cooked up to astound the outsiders.

Outside the casino, the sound of the night watch faded. He Yan stood up and said: “The dawn is near, it’s time for me to return.”

“Gongzi,” a bearded old man smiled slightly, “Just gamble one more time. How about changing the method?”

He Yan raised her eyebrows and looked at him: “What do you mean?”

“We won’t gamble based on big or small dice anymore. You seem to be an expert, so guessing the number on the dice should be easy for you, right?” He pushed the piles of jewelry and money on the table to the center, “If you win, all these will belong to you.”

He Yan glanced at the money on the table.

She had gained a lot through this little expedition and was well aware that she had attracted the attention of many individuals. When she was in the army, she had heard a rumour that the casinos in the capital were involved in a number of shady deals. She knew it was time for her to put a stop to gambling, but for some reason, the memory of He Yun Sheng eagerly talking about going to school floated to her mind. She looked at the coat she was wearing—it was the only coat in He Yun Sheng’s possession, and it was rather worn out.

“Alright.” She had made her decision.

There was an instant uproar amongst the onlookers due to the surging enthusiasm.

Guessing the number on the dice and guessing whether the results were big or small were two entirely different matters.

Guessing the answers ‘big’ and ‘small’ was only a matter of luck. However, precision and accuracy were required to guess the numbers on the dice. Once you made a mistake, you couldn’t rectify it, and there were infinitesimal chances of winning this. There was also the fact that the dealer shook the dice rather vigorously.

He Yan also pushed all her money to the center of the table.

If she lost, everything she had done today would be for naught. On the other hand, if she succeeded, the amount she would obtain would be more than enough to cover the He Family’s expenses and He Yun Sheng’s tuition fees for five years.

Watching the situation unfold like this, everyone added their money: “I’m in too!”

“These are my coins; I bet this brother will win!”

“How could that be? I’m betting the opposite, hahaha!”

A game with heavier bargaining chips would have more spectators. Getting rich in a night or losing everything in a night was more entertaining than watching Jing Cheng’s best theatrical troupe performing.

As the bearded old man slowly held up the bowl, the whole casino went silent. It was as if they could only listen to the sound of the dice shaking in the copper bowl.

He Yan’s mind went blank.

She was never good at gambling. At least, that was the case until she returned to Jing Cheng and was married to the Xu Family. After her marriage, she had played poker with the furens of other families in banquets, but she lost badly every time. Those times, Xu Zhi Heng would smile at her warmly and lightly mock her: “How could you be so silly?”

Xu Zhi Heng would rarely show his mischievous side to He Yan. He Yan had assumed that she learnt how to make Xu Zhi Heng show that side of his more often. She felt genuinely happy about this and made a big decision in her heart – she would learn this skill no matter what it took and make Xu Zhi Heng proud in the next banquet.

Yet, it was a pity that before she could master this skill, she had lost her eyesight.

Be it a family feast or a banquet, the Xu Family would never allow a blind person to represent the household. She could no longer step outside, and staying alone at the large manor was rather boring. Hence, she could only learn to listen.

Although she was blind, she refused to seek help from anyone, even if it was only to amble idly around. She had always been a competitive person, so she strove to quickly adapt. She familiarized herself with the characteristics of various sounds and then moved on to learning how to distinguish each one. She then practiced to take action, and when she was finally ready, she used a stick for a sword and revised the movements.

It was during this time that she had learned to listen to the sound of dice.

Dice was easier than poker, He Yan thought. The quainter the movement was, the more challenging it was to her hearing. She listened. Every single side of a die produced a different sound when it fell. She shook dice in a bamboo log then threw them on the table, meditated on the number, and grazed her fingers on the dice to know if she was correct. She frequently made mistakes in the beginning, but the more she practiced, the more accurate she was. She persevered until one day, after guessing the number, she felt the dice and finally smiled.

She had done it.

The servants in Xu household held private discussions about her, saying how she had gone crazy after turning blind, shaking a bamboo log every day in her room. But they gradually discovered that they needn’t help He Yan anymore, and she could do almost everything herself. She could accurately recognize every servant in Xu Family just by listening to their footsteps, and she knew where each piece of furniture was located.

If they didn’t know that He Yan was blind, they would have mistaken her for a person with normal eyesight.

Xu Zhi Heng held her hand and praised her for being so capable. He Yan was delighted, yet in her smile, there was an indescribable loneliness that stemmed from an unknown source.

Her hearing ability back then had reached the point of perfection. Thinking about it now, she had probably heard the cool and perfunctory note in Xu Zhi Heng’s voice whenever he talked to her, but her feelings made her subconsciously suppress the thought.

He Yan lowered her eyes. Of course, the player saw things less clearly.

The sound of the dice rattling in the vessel suddenly came to a stop. With a ‘bang’, the bowl was inverted on the table.

One, two. Two dice stayed still.

Everyone’s gazes were fixed on He Yan. He Yan closed her eyes. It was as if she had returned to the days in the Xu Family when she’d sat in front of the table, shaking the bamboo log alone, then opening it and feeling the surface of the dice with her fingers.

Trying to catch that small ray of light in the darkness.

“Two, five.” She opened her eyes and said.

The inverted bowl was quickly lifted, and two dice were reflected in everyone’s eyes.

At first, there was a prolonged silence. After a few moments, the sounds of exclamation started one after the other. A young man in brocade clothes grabbed He Yan’s arm and loudly proclaimed: “Superior! From this day forth, you are my master! Please accept your apprentice!”

He Yan helplessly shook away his hand.

The bearded old man’s smile slightly stiffened, but he recovered after a moment. He patted his beard and said lightly: “I will not take back my word. All these treasures belong to you.” He paused and added: “May I know gongzi’s name? May I have the pleasure to drink a cup of tea with you?”

He Yan packed all the money and jewelry and politely declined: “I’m just a kid with no name, it’s nothing worth knowing. It’s already late, let’s drink tea together another time.” After finishing her words, she walked past the crowd and hastily left Le Tong.

Some people remained stunned, while some continued to gamble. The bearded old man’s smile remained unchanged as he turned and headed upstairs. Another man followed him. The old man turned to him and commanded: “Go after that lad.”

On the other side, a burly chap pressed his fingers then waved at the guards behind him. They followed him out of the casino.

“Running away after winning my money? There’s no such good thing in this world, fool!”

# Chapter 11: THE FAIRY UNDER THE MOON

It was completely dark. There was not a single soul in the alley, only a stray cat occasionally leaping about, its soft sound filling Jing Cheng’s spring night.

A young boy gripping a bulging package traipsed through the alley like a ghost.

One was innocent, but, a criminal if one held jade. She had won a lot of money in Le Tong Gambling House, which would inevitably attract trouble. If she used the main road, danger might knock on the He Family’s door, and that was the last thing she wanted to happen.

However… the more one feared, the more trouble approached. He Yan stopped.

The end of the alley led to a nearby street where most of the shops and taverns were closed, much unlike the lively Le Tong Gambling House. It was eerie and devoid of people. Only the moonlight and twinkling stars illuminated the road.

He Yan looked back and crouched down to pick a few small stones. She pondered for a moment, then suddenly turned her head and hurled the stones into the distance.

The stones were fast and sharp, like an arrow without its head. With a ‘puff’ sound, someone fell from the dark area.

“Stop following me.” He Yan warned: “You guys can’t catch up.”

“Then what if we join in?” A voice replied, followed by a few people stepping out of the opposite end of the alley. The leader was a shirtless bruiser, his hands looking like they could twist He Yan’s neck.

“Little brat, it looks like you have quite a lot of opponents.” That bruiser laughed loudly, “Did no one teach you not to be too striking when you first go to a casino?”

He Yan gathered the money towards her body and answered calmly: “Since it’s my first time going to a casino, obviously no one had ever taught me before.” But she thought in her heart that the people from the casino were really like what her brothers from the army had described—they were not kind people. They broke the rules they, themselves, had made.

“You’re obstinate even when you’re facing death!” The bruiser was livid, “Today I’ll teach you a lesson. I’ll unscrew your arm, let you kneel before me, and have you call me grandfather!”

As He Yan stood in the alley, the bruiser and his men assembled on her front, while a group of unknown stalkers lagged behind. She was surrounded and had nowhere to hide.

She wasn’t even armed.

“Then let’s just see if you can do it.” She clenched her fist slowly.

“Arrogant!” The bruiser waved his hand to urge his men forward. He also advanced, and although his skills were lacking, he arbitrarily slung a fist towards He Yan’s back.

Under the moonlight, the young boy maneuvered his body downward and skillfully evaded the attack. The bruiser’s eyes were dazzled, then he felt a sharp punch land on his rear. It was like adding oil to the fire. He snarled furiously as he surveyed the area for the young boy, who had already hopped on to the alley walls.

“Get him!”

The stalker who followed He Yan understood the situation. Someone grabbed He Yan’s clothes to yank her down. With a ‘scrzz’ sound, her clothing had torn.

“Damn!” He Yan cursed as she deplored, “It’s spoiled.”

“You still have the mood to worry about your clothes?” The bruiser roared till his nose wrinkled, and was further stimulated, “I’ll beat you to death today!”

He pounced towards He Yan, his large physique akin to a small mountain, causing the ground to quake as he took action. He believed it to be a piece of cake to teach the kid a lesson since they beat him in numbers.

However, they kicked an iron plate for the first time that day. Although the young boy looked juvenile in age, he was as agile as a slippery loach that no one could capture. He shuttled through the squad of villains, landing a few but accurate hits on their vital spots as he did so. Not long later, the men lay flat on the ground after successive strikes.

He Yan scuffled away from the bruiser’s fist and kicked his abdomen with a whirl of her body. Unfortunately, her actions were a bit crooked.

The bruiser immediately howled in pain.

“Sorry, I didn’t do it on purpose.” She was a bit diffident.

After all, since this body and her skills didn’t tally well yet, her attacks couldn’t be accurate and precise. The bruiser lurched on the ground as he shielded his lower body, producing a distressing sound that frightened people.

He Yan bent her waist to retrieve the money that scattered on the ground. She was occupied the whole night and got involved in a brawl. She refused to let other snatch her hard-earned silver.

The moonlight shone on the ground dotted with pieces of silver and jewelry. As the young boy picked them up, he looked as though he belonged to a scene from one of the chapters of a monster fairy myth: A scholar accidentally walked into a mystical wonderland and spotted money and jewelry strewn along the area. He then gave in to temptation and kept them as his own.

Thinking about this scene, He Yan felt a bit funny and she started laughing.

After collecting everything, she examined the moaning men on the floor. As she motioned to escape, she suddenly heard a soft and gentle voice: “This little brother, you dropped your money.”

He Yan turned and looked.

A young man stood at the door of the closed tavern. He wore an indigo-coloured wide-sleeve robe, his clothes slightly shaking in the wind, outlining his lean body. His dark black hair was tied with a sapphire tuinga. He had long brows and fine eyes, very gentle and refined, slightly like a fairy. He smiled and took a step forward, a small piece of silver resting on his palm, which must have fallen and rolled towards his direction amidst the chaos.

She did feel someone’s presence at the tavern, but that someone had arrived earlier and seemed disinteresred to join the fight. She had assumed the stranger to be a passerby, so she chose to ignore but unexpectedly met the person.

He Yan had seen plenty of men in her life. In her past life, she had to socialize with men in her male disguise. She mostly came across brawny men like that bruiser, and they couldn’t be considered handsome, not to say beautiful. Xu Zhi Heng was elegant and graceful, and could be counted as good-looking. However, in comparison to the young man across her, he seemed far inferior.

As she was gathering the silver pieces just now, she had thought it similar to a scene from a folk tale. Now even more so, where the poor young boy encountered a real fairy and was enchanted by the fairy’s appearance. Would the fairy then teach the boy some sort of special skill?

As she ambled closer, she felt that the young man was really like a fairy from a painting. Seeing her in a trance, the fairy spoke again: “Little brother?”

He Yan pulled herself back.

She took the discarded silver piece from his hand and smiled: “Thank you.”

That young man replied with a smile, “You’re welcome.”

He Yan turned and left without looking back.

She treaded briskly, like a stray cat parading on the walls, gone after a few steps and could not be chased further.

In the dark night, someone appeared and walked towards the man wearing blue, whispering: “Si gongzi, that boy…”

“He’s most probably just an occasional passerby, don’t mind him.” The fairy smiled. As though recalling something amusing, his smile widened, “He’s quite clever.”

# Chapter 12: BECOMING RICH OVERNIGHT

He Yan returned home with the money.

Fortunately, Qing Mei didn’t notice as He Yan searched for the chest in which she had kept silver and pieces of jewelry. After emptying its meager contents, she filled in the treasure she had earned that night.

Perhaps it was because she had won a huge amount of money that night, she was in a good mood and slept soundly. She dreamed of those good, old days when she used to gamble with the soldiers under her. In her dream, the men yelled: “Open! Open!” Seeing that He Yan was reluctant, one of them laughed loudly: “General, what’s the matter? Did you lose again?”

“Did General win even one round tonight?” The Deputy General shook his head, apparently disappointed. “Ah… General isn’t good at this.”

“Shut it! Haven’t you people heard the saying ‘the one who loses in gambles wins in love’? Our General may have lost this time but I tell you, he’ll be invincible when it comes to his love life!”

He Yan guffawed when she heard that.

As she laughed, she felt someone pushing her. Her eyes fluttered open. Qing Mei’s face appeared in front of her. “Miss, did you dream of something good? You were smiling happily while sleeping.”

The room was bright because of the sunlight flowing in through the windows. He Yan shielded her face from the light with her hand. She was shaken inside. It was the first time she had woken up so late.

Spring days were really comfortable for sleeping.

She recalled the dream she had. Back then, the men had consoled her saying that her love life would be successful, but they didn’t have any idea how wrong they were. Perhaps she won several rounds last day because her conjugal life was a failure.

He Yun Sheng’s indignant voice came from the door: “He Yan, the sun is already up, aren’t you going to work today?”

It was hard to believe that the person who said this was the same as the one who strongly opposed the idea of her going to work.

“Wait for me.” He Yan swiftly changed into clean clothing.

Just as Qing Mei walked out carrying a basin of water, He Yun Sheng entered the room and said: “Why are you so slow today… He Yan?!”

“What?” He Yan is busy tying up the sandbags to her limbs as she met He Yun Sheng’s furious eyes. Puzzled, she asked: “What’s wrong?”

He Yun Sheng pointed to the chair: “What’s wrong?! See for yourself what’s wrong!”

There was fury in the young man’s voice. It felt as if he could burn down the entire household just with the fire in his voice. He Yan looked towards the direction he was pointing to. There was the maroon long coat, carelessly crumpled in a chair, the one she had ‘borrowed’ from He Yun Sheng to go to the casino. After returning, she simply took off the coat and threw to the chair. She hadn’t given it much thought until now.

Not waiting for He Yan to respond, He Yun Sheng took a step forward and took a look at the coat. The coat was crumpled up by He Yan, it was also dirty and smudged. Upon closer look, there was a cut in the middle. Altogether, it looked rather wretched.

“So this is what you wanted to sew for me?” Nothing could diminish He Yun Sheng’s raging fury now. To think that he was so touched when He Yan expressed willingness to sew his clothes for him. He had come to the conclusion that He Yan did love her brother but looking at the coat… she was definitely sent by God to punish him!

“This is a misunderstanding, I can explain.” He Yan tried to calm down the lad.

“Explain? How would you explain this? Do you know…” He Yun Sheng’s voice was full of wrath at first, but now, he suddenly choked and his eyes turned red. He said: “This was my only coat… you cut it into pieces, what would I wear now?”

He Yan’s head started to ache.

He Yan really, really, really couldn’t stand seeing someone cry. Especially when it came to an aggressive, young lad who cried in such a heart-broken manner.

He Yun Sheng felt wronged.

Young men like He Yun Sheng were rather concerned about their dignity. If they were poor, they could be considered good if they had filial piety and worked hard. Even so, everyone had at least a little bit of vanity. He had worn this coat for many years. When worn, this was the only piece of clothing that made him look like a ‘young master.’

Although He Yan’s clothes could not be compared to those of the rich families’ girls, she did buy one or two pieces of fashionable clothes every year. Since He Sui doted on her excessively, He Yun Sheng could not utter a word of opposition. Girls ought to carry themselves in style and manner, why should boys care about their external appearance?

Yet, at this month, He Yun Sheng felt that he was being denied justice.

He Yan stammered while speaking: “S-Since this is spoiled, let’s buy another one. We’ll find the best tailors in Jing Cheng to make a new coat for you, one with those embroidered patterns, okay? The cloth used will be the finest too, d-don’t cry, I didn’t do that on purpose… Alright? Y-Yun Sheng?”

He Yan had never coaxed him with such a soft and gentle voice, so unknowingly, his anger was half gone, but he still held some resentment within him: “We don’t have a single penny!”

“Says who?” He Yan took opened the chest and showed him, “We have got lots of money.”

He Yun Sheng’s eyeballs nearly dropped out of their sockets. He tried to regain his composure: “Where did you get the money from?”

“Hmm?”

The next moment, He Yun Sheng rushed up to her and said, clearly bewildered: “Your face…”

Face? He Yan was startled. Did her face change too? That couldn’t be, she had washed her face thoroughly with the water from the tank outside the house when she returned last night.

She walked towards the mirror while He Yun Sheng’s angry voice sounded from behind her: “Who hit you?”

The reflection of the girl in the mirror hadn’t changed. Her brows were as elegant and refined as ever and her pair of watery eyes had the moist gleam of autumnal waves. However… He Yan’s gaze moved down her face and stopped at the light bruise near her lips. The bruise looked clearer against her fair skin.

When Qing Mei had woken up He Yan, she couldn’t see it because He Yan covered her face with her hand. But now, He Yun Sheng obviously saw it.

As He Yan’s skin was tender and delicate, it could not withstand anything. She recollected the memories of last night. Someone had hit her on the face but it didn’t hurt a lot, so He Yan put it to the back of her mind. Who knew it would actually leave a mark on her skin.

He Yun Sheng kept questioning her: “What actually happened? This money… these clothes…” He was suddenly horrified, then dejected: “You…”

Seeing that this young boy was thinking too much, He Yan lightly hit his head, “How far did your imagination go? I borrowed your clothes and wore them to a casino last night, gambled a round or two and won the money. Some people came to me looking for trouble so I taught them a lesson and in the process, got hurt. It’s fine, the mark will be gone tomorrow.”

She said it so casually, but she was unaware that her words had made the young boy’s heart tremble.

“You… I…”

He Yan went to a casino? He Yan went gambling and even won money? He Yan was in trouble and taught them a lesson after winning money?

No matter what, He Yun Sheng wasn’t easily convinced. He even doubted that someone had stealthily substituted his sister. (Editor: You are right, boy)

Or else, how could he explain the inconceivable things his sister had done?

“Yes,” He Yan explained calmly, “Because we’re too poor, I wanted to try my luck out at the gambling house and hit jackpot. Maybe this was God’s will. I was frightened of those people who wanted to harm me, but my strength had considerably grown after climbing the hill and chopping wood with you.” He Yun Sheng was still stunned, so He Yan continued, “If you don’t believe in what I said, you can go to Le Tong Gambling House to verify the facts. Trust me, I never lied to you.”

“But… but…”

He Yun Sheng was still muddleheaded, but looking at He Yan’s confident expression, his instincts told him that she was speaking the truth.

“Oh, right,” He Yan smiled, “Since we have money now, we won’t be selling Da Nai cakes anymore.”

“Then what will we do?” He Yun Sheng asked, mumbling.

“Of course we’re going to the drill fields. Yun Sheng, don’t you want to go to college?” She asked.

# Chapter 13: HUMILATION

He Yun Sheng’s mind could not stop dwelling on the last words He Yan had told him.

“Yun Sheng, don’t you want to go to school?”

Of course, he desperately wanted to attend school. The academy had scholars and martial arts instructors, and he could study together with his fellow students. You could rely on yourself to build a stable career through exams, scholarships and physical examinations. On the other hand, haphazardly trying your luck without any preparation could result in dreadful consequences.

In the past, his family had been poor and famished, but now they had money. The repressed aspirations buried at the bottom of Yun Sheng’s heart gradually surfaced.

He glanced secretly at the young woman walking beside him. He Yan…. ever since He Yan had recovered, he felt as if many things had drastically improved within the family. He no longer felt as heavy as the treading deep, stagnant water. At some unknown time, a light breeze had swept over the water, creating ripples, such that the old-fashioned attitudes were cleared away, replaced by all the colors of spring.

It was spring time.

He Yan took notice of his penetrating gaze, and suddenly held her veil to her face. She warned once again, “We’ve already agreed to not expose anything until we meet father, understand?”

“…Fine.” He Yun Sheng replied.

He Yan had never once visited the open fields at the military grounds’ East End City Gate. Once she had left the military to return to the capital, He Ru Fei substituted her. Afterwards, she could never attend any ‘General Fei Hong’-related activities. He Yan could only occasionally pass by when she accompanied Xu great-grandmother on her walks. At those times, she had felt so much yearning.

The capital’s military grounds were still very large. The flag was waving in the wind, and sometimes a general officer would scold his soldiers. Since this year was peaceful and prosperous, the grounds had practically turned into an equestrian archery playground for the sons of rich nobles. There were arrows and weaponry scattered everywhere, blocking one’s field of vision.

As soon as He Yan arrived there, she couldn’t avert her eyes.

In the past, He Yan had a double-edged sword of white-green jade hue with an edge that cut through iron like butter. It was by her side throughout wars and battles for many years, but when she had married into the Xu family, she didn’t bring it with her, and she deeply missed it immediately.

He Yuan Sheng *(He Yan’s adoptive father)*had told her: “The Xu family has a scholarly reputation, if you bring your sword there, your husband and in-laws would not be pleased.”

Her own father He Yuan Liang was concerned, and pointed out to her, “To do that is to invite misfortune.”

So she had reluctantly left her jade sword at home, and asked her family to safeguard it well. But when she first returned home after her marriage, the jade sword was hanging from He Ru Fei’s waist.

She questioned He Ru Fei, yet when He Ru Fei hadn’t even spoken, He Yuan Sheng intervened, “Ru Fei is now General Fei Hong. If his sword isn’t with him, others will doubt him!”

“That’s right, that’s right. At any rate, you won’t be able to use it in the future,” He Yuan Liang chimed in.

It was as if her cheerful mood was entirely washed over by cold water, from her head to her feet. At that time, she finally became aware of the significance of her marriage, of the significance of giving away the title of General Fei Hong. It meant that from here on out, she’d be like the great-grandmother of the Xu family and the first wife of the second branch of the He family⁠—she’d stay at home taking care of domestic duties, supporting her husband in a harmonious marriage. Those swords, warhorses, soldiers, and liberty, the blood-filled triumphs and accomplishments of war, all were subserviently forfeited to another person.

Besides, no one understood her feelings.

First it was her jade sword, then it was her warhorse, and after that her troops, everything which belonged to her were taken away, one by one. Her past ten years of laborious work, all to become a wedding dress by Xu Zhi Heng’s side.

She was devoid of everything.

He Yun Sheng asked, “Hey, what’s up with you? You don’t look so good.”

He Yan, momentarily lost for words, cleared her mind, smiled and said, “Nothing’s wrong.” She looked around her. “How come we haven’t seen father?”

“They seem to be over there.” He Yun Sheng pointed to the other side of the track. “Probably horse training.”

There were frequently new fleets of horses brought to the military grounds, and some had an unruly temper that refused command, so they needed to be trained for a while. Nowadays, the city gate’s officers were of low competence. It could be said that their skill levels were essentially on par with the sparring partners of the rich sons of nobles that came to the grounds to practice equestrian archery.

“Let’s go over there…” He Yun Sheng said.

He Yan nodded, but suddenly stopped walking. She took an iron-headed rod from the upper shelves of a weapon rack in her hands.

He Yun Sheng asked, “What are you gonna do with that?”

“Just getting the feel of it,” He Yan replied. “Let’s go.”

He Yun Sheng was speechless. The two walked towards the track by the stables, but when they were not yet close, they suddenly heard a clamour. The two looked over, and two horses swept past them. On one horse sat a well-dressed gentleman, and on the other sat a person similar to a black bear: he was tanned and built robustly. Who was that person beside He Sui?

Who was He Sui horse racing with?

“The Childe is so strong!” The faces of the pages sitting by the side were filled with delight. “Three rounds already, and he’s won every one of them!”

It’s already been three rounds? He Yan glanced around and didn’t see anything serious. Upon this impression, she only raised her eyebrows.

The horse beneath He Sui probably hadn’t yet been able to go through training yet, upon a look one could tell it had a wild nature and was difficult to domesticate. Its footsteps were particularly uneven; He Sui was clearly managing his balance while riding this horse. That well-dressed childe was intentionally using his own horse to knock into He Sui’s horse, so much so that He Yan noticed it right away. His horsewhip hit the rear of He Sui’s horse.

The horse leaped about wildly, and practically threw down He Sui. He Yun Sheng shouted out, “Dad!” He was getting anxious.

The finely clothed gentleman just laughed.

Just as this round finished, He Sui stopped his horse, albeit also with much difficulty, as it was struggling in its place for a while before quieting down.

The gentleman had already been helped down from his horse by others, and proudly said, “He Xiao Wei’s skill is still lacking, he can’t even train a single horse. But you’ve improved compared to the previous match. At least you haven’t fallen and gotten kicked by the horse.”

Falling? Getting kicked?

He Yan looked over at He Sui, yet she saw a face dripping with sweat, swollen and battered with a bloody nose, with a horseshoe imprint on his shirt, evidently his fall wasn’t light. This guy… she couldn’t help but feel a little angry.

The gentlemandelightedly threw out a silver coin, “Not bad, not bad, this young master is very happy. This is a reward for you.”

The silver coin fell to the ground, despite being watched by everyone, He Sui bent over to pick it up. He cheerfully expressed his gratitude, “Thank you very much, Zhao *gongzi*.”

Never before having seen his father’s meek side, He Yun Sheng blew up in fury and cried out, “What are you giving thanks for, haven’t you seen how he played you?”

“Yun Sheng?” He Sui just had just noticed He Yan and He Yun Sheng. He asked, “Yan Yan, how did you guys get here?”

“Who’s this fellow?” asked Zhao *gongzi*.

“He is this son of this dog, Yun Sheng.” He Sui apologetically smiled.

“Oh— ,” Zhao *gongzi* replied, “Your son seems to have quite the uncooperative attitude towards me.”

“For that kind of matter? This kid is not sensible.” He Sui knuckled He Yun Sheng’s head. “Hurry and say sorry to Zhao *gongzi*.”

“I don’t— ” He Yun Sheng snapped. This Zhao *gongzi* was clearly humiliating He Sui, but He Sui, as a man of lower class played along. But why? In any case, as low as He Sui’s skill could be, he was still an official, not the Zhao household’s servant, so why should he be humiliated this way?

He Yun Sheng held his head high, refusing to lower it.

Zhao *gongzi* glanced at him, and an interesting idea seemed to come to him. “How about this, I was going to let your dad go against me in another match, but now I have an idea. You and me can have a match. This young master will bestow you a silver coin.” He held out his hand, and a servant handed over a silver coin.

“Out of the question!” He Sui, alarmed, instantly replied, and immediately bent down: “Yun Sheng has never touched a horse, I can still practice with the gentleman.”

Although He Sui normally favored He Yan, it didn’t that mean he didn’t love his son. This Zhao *gongzi* wasn’t a good person. Despite this rich family’s son’s humiliating acts, He Sui had already been well-experienced in them, and didn’t care about this.

At He Yun Sheng’s age, he should be trained at an academy. As for He Yan, He Sui had to save up a dowry for her. If she wanted to marry into a rich family, she had to bring along money. But he didn’t have any other means besides offering his strength, so he could only flatter these young masters and make them happy, thus earning silver.

Unexpectedly, today his pitiful appearance in a difficult situation had been seen by his son and daughter. He Sui’s heart felt shame and sorrow.

Yun Sheng truly had a youthful valor, and couldn’t accept these humiliations, but he didn’t know of Zhao *gongzi*’s dangerous character. If he seriously intended to race horses with Zhao *gongzi* today, it would be a wonder if he had half his life left afterwards. One had to understand, this horse was one that was just brought today, and it hadn’t even been trained once, let alone race this horse, simply riding it was far from easy.

He couldn’t let an accident happen to his son.

“I’ll practice with you.” He Sui placidly said with a smile.

“That wouldn’t be okay.” Zhao *gongzi* shook his head. “I want him.”

He Sui’s smile froze.

During this deadlock, suddenly someone spoke up. A sharp and clear sound broke the silence.

“How about I race with you for one round?”

Everyone turned their heads to look, that person who was silent before had suddenly spoken. The young woman’s presence was noticed only then. She was wearing a light short-sleeved jacket with lotus embroidery. There was a gown inside, and a scarlet skirt. Her face, elegant and supple, was covered with a white veil, only showing a pair of graceful, moon-shaped eyes.

“And who are you?” asked Zhao *gongzi*.

“I,” the young woman slightly nodded her head, “am only one who has been trained in horsemanship.”

# Chapter 14: HORSE-RIDING

“I,” the young woman slightly nodded her head, “am only one who has been trained in horsemanship.”

The girl swept her hands behind her, clasping an iron-headed stick and swaying it in a mischievous and leisurely manner, her tone relaxed.

“Yan Yan?” He Sui was stunned for a moment, and then quietly rebuked: “What are you talking about?”

He Yan didn’t spare He Sui a glance, but instead stared at Zhao *gongzi* and challenged, “Is the gentleman willing?”

Zhao *gongzi* was a man of passion. Although the girl’s face was concealed behind a veil, from her pair of exposed eyes, he could faintly guess her appearance to be above average. Besides, when she reached her hand out with a stern look, her voice had sounded very clear, much like a delicate beauty. And when a delicate beauty put forward her request, he naturally did not have the heart to refuse.

“The girl doesn’t know that this horse is fierce. If you are hurt because of this, I will be very upset,” he also reminded with good intentions, conscious of his own gracefulness.

But as soon as he finished speaking, he heard the girl chuckle and, in a flourish, the peony flowers on the girl’s vermilion dress dazzled his eyes, conjuring a fragrant breeze. Looking up again, He Yan was seated upright atop the horse’s back, clutching the reins in her hand.

He Sui had originally pulled the horse towards them, but he didn’t expect He Yan to suddenly turn over and mount on the horse. As soon as his hand loosened, the rope fell, frightening the horse. He let out a long hiss and lurched up in place.

“Yan Yan—” He Sui exclaimed, also startling He Yun Sheng.

He Yan was in no hurry. She simply tossed the reins aside and hastily grasped the mane on the horse’s neck. She held it firmly and tightly, intent on keeping the horse upright and stable. She then bent forward and pressed her lips close to the horse’s ear, purring a series of strange noises.

Strangely, the horse stopped struggling, and its front hooves retracted to its original place, gradually calming down.

The crowd was astonished.

“Yan Yan, come down quickly,” He Sui’s heart finally fell to the ground, and he eagerly extended his hand towards He Yan, “Don’t fall.”

He Yun Sheng finally came back to his senses. The boy bit his lips, his face turning white as his voice trembled, “You… come down quickly! Do you want to die? Do you?!”

“Hahahaha,” the dazed master Zhao burst out laughing. “I didn’t expect the girl to be an expert. In that case,” he also turned over and hopped on the horse, “How about a match, little girl? “

He had proposed very elegantly.

He Yan smiled, “The gentleman should be careful. I did say I was trained.” After which, she stretched out her hand, slapped the horse’s buttocks, and had the horse gallop away with a cloud of dust!

“Don’t you use a whip?” Mr. Zhao murmured, then flourished his whip, “Go!”

The two horses trailed out smoke on the track, leaving behind a crowd of stunned onlookers.

He Sui slowly turned his head and shot He Yun Sheng an inquisitive look. He Yun Sheng hastened to explain, “Don’t ask me. I don’t even know when she had learned to ride a horse!”

He Sui thought he was imagining things.

He knew his daughter best. She was proficient in the four arts: music, chess, calligraphy, and painting, and was also eager in dressing herself up. But when it came to riding horses and playing swords, let alone being skilled, the mere mention of them provoked her disgust. He Yan was fond of those elegant childe brothers who immersed themselves in tea, poetry, and flowers beneath the moonlight. She shied away from these coarse things for fear of ruining her delicate skin.

But she turned over and mounted the horse so skillfully, as though she had done it thousands of times, and even more aptly than her father. Moreover, that fierce horse was as obedient as a kitten under her hand even without the aid of a whip. How did she do it?

He Sui gazed at the figure on the runway.

The blazing steed that He Sui couldn’t tame dashed as swiftly as the wind underneath He Yan, and her posture was somewhat graceful due to the inconvenience brought by her long skirt. She tugged the skirt away, revealing her conspicuous trousers, which should have appeared vulgar, but instead gave off an indescribably downbeat impression.

Zhao *gongzi* couldn’t catch up with her.

Zhao *gongzi* was annoyed.

He had come to the military grounds to make a name for himself, not to lose face. He Sui had flattered and amused him just now, but what was wrong with this girl? He couldn’t lose to a woman, even more so that she was riding a fierce and untamed horse. Was he going to become a laughing stock?

Absolutely impossible!

Suddenly, Zhao *gongzi*‘s heart grew even more competitive, and the horse he was riding bore the brunt. The horse endured the pain, rushed forward, and was about to surpass He Yan.

Yes, that was it. Looking at He Yan’s figure getting closer and closer, Mr. Zhao couldn’t help but be proud. He had learned to ride at the age of seven, and after all these years, how could he be no match for a woman?

His horse finally overtook He Yan’s.

Zhao *gongzi* laughed out loud, “Girl, you’ve got to work harder!”

“The gentleman is so talented,” He Yan exclaimed with faint surprise, “It’s the first time I’ve been overtaken.”

As she spoke, she stroked the iron-headed rod swaying around her waist. Zhao *gongzi*‘s horse was in front of her, while her horse fell behind. The distance between them was so near that one end of the iron-headed stick stabbed the other horse’s rear end.

No one noticed these slight irregularities, except for the horse underneath Zhao *gongzi*‘s body.

The horse was alarmed and suddenly stumbled, catching Zhao *gongzi* off guard. Next moment, his horse disobeyed his command and darted forward, leaving Zhao *gongzi* at a loss for words. He tightened the reins, but it was utterly useless.

“Stop, stop!” He screamed, overwhelmed by force as his body slammed onto the horse’s back.

Behind him came a woman’s eager voice, “Master Zhao? Master Zhao? Are you alright?”

“Save. Help me!” Zhao *gongzi* was so frightened that his voice had transformed into a cry, “Tell it to stop!”

In the distance, He Yun Sheng frowned, “What’s the matter? Why did I seem to hear Zhao *gongzi* shouting for help?”

He Sui was appalled, but he had noticed that at the end of the track, the two horses were running back to them. Zhao *gongzi*‘s horse was ahead, but his whip was missing from his hand, and he was tearfully clinging onto the reins. Behind him, He Yan called on anxiously, but was as steady as Mount Tai on horseback.

“Zhao *gongzi*‘s horse seems to be frightened.” He Sui quickly went to the stable to lead the horse, “I’ll help!”

“Young master, young master,” the boy’s face was blue, “You mustn’t lose the reins.”

Zhao *gongzi* was mournfully wailing on horseback. He Yan freed her hand and pressed it against her ear. It was too noisy.

Such an arrogant boy, if she didn’t scare him to death today, she would not be called He Yan. At that time, there were no lack of recruits in the army who had thought they were superior and gifted, but in the end, reality beat them into submission. In this world, after all, there were plenty of talented people, so it was better to keep a low profile.

After enjoying enough, she spotted He Sui leading the horse from a distance, so He Yan once again patted her horse’s buttocks. The horse stopped. She heroically flew off the horse and crossed the iron-headed stick horizontally against Zhao *gongzi*‘s horse’s neck. This sudden action obstructed the horse, causing him to behave erratically. He Yan snatched the reins and uttered, “Whew—”

The horse quieted down.

Wind unfurled the white veil, and, for a very brief moment, exposed the girl’s face. After a glance, her face was once again covered with white cloth.

“All right,” she spoke towards the man hugging the horse and weeping, “You can come down now, Zhao *gongzi*.”

“Woo— woo—”

Zhao *gongzi* wept.

——- Extra Topic ——–

Yan Yan: [covering her face] Uncle will officially appear in the next chapter.

# Chapter 15: WU LING NOBLE SON

The bawling Zhao gongzi was using the back of his hands to wipe away tears while muttering swears under his breath. When he dismounted, his legs trembled, and he almost fell over.

The manservant went over and lent a hand to support him, and said, “Gongzi, gongzi, are you okay?”

Zhao gongzi kicked him, “Do I look okay to you?”

“Just now, really scared me to death.” He Yan expressed, “It was all my fault. If I didn’t insist on racing with the gentleman, he wouldn’t have been terrified.”

Her heart was full of regret, and she sincerely apologized, “Please don’t take offense, gongzi.”

Take offense? Why would he take offense? Across him was the person who saved his life, why would he be offended? Zhao gongzi willed a smile, but in the end there was still a breath left unsaid in his heart. He glared at the horse, whose head was still lowered, looked at the grass, then shifted to the cause of disaster, the horse saddle, and was unable to restrain his anger. He waved his hand, “This ungrateful, backstabbing, bastard almost hurt this young master. Throw him out! I’ll have him turned to horse jerky!”

He Yun Sheng furrowed his brow, and He Yan’s smiling expression turned even colder.

A horse was like a high-ranking military officer. Not only was it a method of transport, it was also a comrade-in-arms to share life and death with. Horses couldn’t speak, but they would carry a soldier charging into battle. They couldn’t express their thoughts, but they would whinny to mourn over their owner’s death, so much so that they would go on a hunger strike. They treasured their owner as much as their owner cherished them.

The wealthy and pampered gentleman hadn’t yet gotten a taste of the cruelties of the battleground, so it was impossible for him to understand the intimate bond between a man and a warhorse. Even before one’s birth, they were already conformed to the social hierarchy segregating nobility from common people. An animal, he would never consider hesitating over. Once it was killed, then it was killed; there was no point in troubling oneself over trifles.

“…. This is a fine horse.” The one who spoke up was He Sui, and he soothingly pleaded, “Gongzi, please think this over.”

“This is my horse.” Zhao gongzi didn’t know who to direct his temper at, and He Sui had just interjected like that. Zhao gongzi coldly laughed, “Anything wrong with doing what I want to do?” He drew a dagger from his waist, which glittered like frost, and declared, “I’ll not only kill it, but I’ll kill it right here!”

The dagger’s handle was inlaid with a ruby the size of a dove egg. The scabbard was forged with gold, appearing incomparably gorgeous, yet the knife’s edge was directly facing the currently grazing warhorse. The horse, utterly unaware of his owner’s heart overflowing with killing intent, leisurely shook his tail.

Zhao gongzi’s eyes glistened with murderous desire, as though cooking up a good method. Since this horse startled him and let him lose face, he could just slaughter it on the spot. Firstly, it would be a way for him to release his anger. Secondly, he would appear brave and his lost honor would be restored.

He bellowed at the manservant, “Capture him!”

He Yan’s palm twitched and unconsciously carressed the iron-headed rod by her waist.

She couldn’t… she couldn’t watch this horse die because of her. But even if she took action, she didn’t have a proper excuse.

The horse was pinned by some manservants. The head manservant turned around and yelled out, “Gongzi, gongzi, we’ve pinned him! Please take action now, gongzi!”

Zhao gongzi, with a dagger in hand, strode over. Facing the horse’s neck, the coldness of the dagger gleamed as he was about to swing—

“Thump—”

A sharp and clear noise, similar to metal clashing against gold, resounded as something dropped to the ground. He Yan stealthily retracted her extended hand but saw that the dagger Zhao gongzi was holding had already fallen. Zhao gongzi was clutching his wrist, crying out, ‘Aiyo, aiyo.’

“Who? Who was it?” He called out as he shifted about in pain, while not forgetting to insult, “Who fucking messed with me?”

“It was me.”

Someone’s voice floated from behind.

This voice… He Yan’s head slightly moved, and she turned around to look over. But when she looked behind her, she didn’t expect two more people to arrive, also riding on horseback. The young man on the left wore a licorice-root yellow robe with a rounded neckline, and the color looked sharp worn by him. With rosy lips and pure white teeth, a light smile, and pupils that glistened like crystals, rarely could one witness a person with such a boyish and naive air about him. He was a spirited playboy-type son of a wealthy family.

But the young man on the right… He Yan’s eyes lit up.

It became spring. Colors blossoming, ice and snow melting—there was an entire city of spring colors.

The young man dressed in yellow clothing was actually very handsome, and his eyebrows even more so. His face was as beautiful as jade, and his eyes sparkled like stars. His eyes were gently shaped, though slightly raised at the corners, and were akin to limpid autumn water. His presence made others’ hearts skip a beat, as his gaze was ice-cold.

Despite his youthful disposition, he wore a crown, his fine hair gracefully falling straight down. He wore a colorful suit, his lapels adorned with a rosefinch delicately stitched with golden thread. His presence imposed an air of grandeur. He wore olive boots, a sterling sword by his waist. His white horse donned on a golden saddle, carrying with it an aura of elegance. At the moment, the fingers on his right hand were toying with a dark perfume satchel, its contents producing a clinking sound.

What a charming and elegant Wu Ling noble son![1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#1)

He Yan’s heart was pounding with admiration, but she suddenly felt uneasy. At lightning speed, before she could even lower her head, the white cloth slightly swayed and covered her eyes, blocking her vision.

Only while listening to that Zhao gongzi‘s dreadful flattery did she remember: “Turns out it’s Chief Commander Xiao[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#2)… excuse me.”

Within He Yan’s thoughts suddenly surfaced another spring day like this that happened many years ago, on a peaceful day when birds were chirping and dancing, and the willow tree was swaying in the Autumn courtyard. She had raised her head, confused, and spotted a handsome young man wearing a white embroidered jacket at the Poplar Swings Garden, his expression filled with annoyance, but his valiant bearing unrestrained.

On a lazy spring day, with a light breeze in the air, he stood out like a person from a painting, and all the colors of spring could not match up to him.

Xiao Jue, Xiao Huai Jin[3](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#3)—her previous life’s antagonist, her classmate, and the outstanding famous general, General Feng Yun[4](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#4).

[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#s1) 五陵贵公子 (Wǔ Líng guì gōngzǐ)：Wu Ling isn’t a title or anything. It literally refers to the tomb of five Han kings in Chang’an. But in this context, it’s used as a metaphor for the rich or children from noble families that have produced a lot of officials for several generations. He Yan describing him as such is like emphasizing just how exceptionally rich and noble this person is.

[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#s2) 肖都督 (Xiào dū dū): lit. commander-in-chief Xiao. But we’ll be using Chief Commander Xiao instead as it sounds less awkward. It’s just another one of his titles…

[3](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#s3) 肖珏 (Xiào Jué) is his given name, while 肖怀瑾 (Xiào Huái Jǐn) is his [courtesy name](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Courtesy_name). The courtesy name would replace a man’s given name as he entered adulthood. It could be given either by the parents or by a private teacher on the first day of school. Women might adopt a zi in place of their given name upon marriage. One also may adopt a self-chosen courtesy name.

[4](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-15%2F#s4) 封云将军 (Fēng Yún jiāngjūn): General Feng Yun is a title bestowed to him by the emperor after having achieved something meritorious, the same way He Yan (or should we say, He Ru Fei) was bestowed the title ‘General Fei Hong’.

# Chapter 16: GIFTING A STEED

The wind threatened to blow the veil covering her face, making He Yan lower her head. She could hear He Yun Sheng gasping and whispering ‘Chief Commander Xiao!’ beside her.

The sight of the hero he had always worshipped prompted He Yun Sheng to make such a yearning exclamation.

“Chief Commander Xiao, what are you doing in the drill fields?” Zhao gongzi, who had acted so high and mighty in front of He Sui and the others, was merely a dog wagging its tail in front of Chief Commander Xiao. Everyone present could not help but shake in alarm.

“How much does this steed cost?” The young man on the horse asked calmly.

“Ah?” Zhao gongzi was at a loss for words, but he replied honestly: “Thirty taels of silver.”

Chief Commander Xiao raised his chin and peered at Zhao gongzi. The next moment, two pieces of silver ingots flew out of the dark green sachet in his hand and landed on the grass. One of the pieces even bounced off Zhao gongzi’s wrist before landing.

“I’ll buy your horse,” Chief Commander Xiao said, still indifferent.

Zhao gongzi‘s lips trembled. He could not utter a word.

Zhao gongzi had originally wanted to save his face and reprimand the real culprit, but he could not do so in front of Xiao Huai Jin, the second son of the Xiao family. Since he could not afford to provoke him, Zhao gongzi swallowed his evil intentions and smiled: “If you want this horse, I’ll give it to you. You need not pay me.”

“No,” Xiao Jue countered. “Nothing in the world is free.”

He Yan sighed in relief. Xiao Jue and He Yan were both generals. Therefore, they could not bear the sight of such fine steeds being killed in the streets.

Fortunately, the horse had escaped this plight due to Xiao Jue’s timely intervention.

As He Yan was pondering this, He Yun Sheng stepped forward and looked at Xiao Jue with admiration.

He said: “Thank you, General Feng Yun, for saving this horse. I sincerely believe that saving lives is worth more than building a pagoda with seven storeys! You are truly amazing!”

If He Yun Sheng was that eager to talk to his hero, the least he could do was to select the right words.

His words were embarrassing, yet he didn’t look like he would apologize. He instead looked like he would promise to study hard any time soon. He Yan could swear that Xiao Jue was sneering at Yun Sheng in his heart that moment.

Contrary to He Yan’s expectations, Xiao Jue didn’t make any sarcastic remark. Instead, he turned to He Yun Sheng, who was gazing at him with eyes as clear and brilliant as stars. He lightly asked: “Do you like this horse?”

He Yun Sheng took a look at the steed and answered honestly, “I like it.”

“It’s yours now,” He said.

“Thank you… wait!” Needless to say, He Yun Sheng was dumbfounded. He wanted to express his gratitude, but Xiao Jue and the yellow-clad youth beside him had already urged their horses to move forward, obviously not willing to spend any more time there. He chased after them for a while, but returned back, still gazing at their distant backs.

He Yan walked up to him, stretched out her hand, and shook it in front of his eyes. “Are you in your right sense now, dear brother?”

He Yun Sheng withdrew his gaze, turned and said, “Where’s Zhao gongzi?”

“He already left,” He Sui rolled his eyes, seemingly not pleased at the way He Yun Sheng had acted. “While you were busy worshiping Chief Commander Xiao.”

Even though Zhao gongzi had been reluctant to leave, he didn’t dare find trouble with Xiao Jue. He could only take the silver Xiao Jue had given him, and immediately left the place in a huff.

He Yun Sheng walked over to the steed his hero had left him. He gently patted its head as if stroking a possession left by his lover. In a daze, he said: “This was gifted to me by General Feng Yun.”

“Why don’t you build a plaque to commemorate this memory?” He Yan asked, her voice laced with sarcasm.

He Yun Sheng glared at her: “What do you know? If Chief Commander Xiao hadn’t passed by just now, this horse would have been killed by that thug, Zhao! I can first-hand say that Chief Commander Xiao is a chivalrous man. He would go any lengths to defend justice!”

“Stop, stop,” He Yan interrupted him, “Speak about something else, anything other than Chief Commander Xiao’s chivalry!” He Yun Sheng was only a child who was kept in the dark about the dangers of the world. Xiao Huai Jin wasn’t a chivalrous man. He had never been so. That man was ruthless as hell.

“Yan Yan, why did you come wearing a veil?” He Sui, who had not said anything till this point, finally found a chance to speak. “And when did you learn to ride a horse? Dad was really scared to death just now. You can’t be so reckless in the future, okay? If something happens to you, what would I tell your mother in heaven? “

He Sui’s attitude towards both of his children was clearly biased.

“This is a new trend in the capital. Lately, going out with a veil seems to be the fashion trend. It seems mysterious and beautiful.’’ He Yan spouted nonsense with a serious face, “Father, don’t you think this looks good on me?”

He Sui exclaimed: “Good! It looks great! “

He Yun Sheng rolled his eyes. He Yan had come up with such a clumsy excuse and He Sui actually believed it.

He Sui trusted He Yan’s words because he knew nothing about the taste of girls. What he did know was that He Yan always liked to dress up and follow the latest fashion trends. Not to mention, He Sui would never suspect that his arrogant and weak daughter actually went to a gambling house to compete with rough people.

“As for horse-riding, I learned it from my friends. Although I only know a few tricks, I’ll make sure to practice till I attain perfection,” He Yan murmured vaguely.

\*

On the other side, Xiao Jue and the young man in yellow robes were riding their horses outside the academy yard near the drill fields.

“That was an interesting experience.” The youth in yellow said with a smile, “Uncle, did you see the girl secretly tampering the horse? That guy called Zhao fell into a trap so easily. Man, that was truly a sight to behold!”

Xiao Jue listened with an indifferent look on his face.

They were just passing by when this scene had unfolded. The woman mounted on the horse was astonishingly agile. He firmly believed that the man surnamed Zhao could not escape easily by killing the horse even if he hadn’t said anything about it. He was sure that the woman would have made a move first as her hands had almost reached the iron-headed stick on her waist before he intervened.

“It’s a pity she kept her head down; I couldn’t see her face properly.” The young man in yellow said while stroking his chin, “Why don’t we go back now and inquire about her details, maybe we can see what she looks like?”

“Go by yourself.” Xiao Jue remained unmoved.

“That won’t do, she only lowered her head after taking a look at you. She must have been shy because she was shocked to see Uncle’s terrific appearance. I think there are a lot of interesting girls in the capital these days. Previously, we had seen a girl take down a bunch of thugs by herself near Zui Yu Restaurant, and today… a girl riding a horse efficiently at the drill fields near the academy. Of all the good girls in the world, why isn’t there one for me?” The young man in yellow pounded his chest and heaved a long sigh.

Xiao Jue looked at him calmly. “Cheng Li Shu, if you don’t shut up, I’ll send you back to the Cheng household.”

As the two men were chatting, they suddenly came across several people standing near the weapons rack, led by a young man in blue. This guy was thin and his appearance would remind one of a banished immortal. He stood there in front of his aides, with a charming smile on his face. They didn’t know how long he had been standing there, but from the looks of it, he had witnessed the whole situation.

“Isn’t he the fourth son of the Shi Jin Count Manor?” Cheng Li Shu whispered, “Why is he here?”

Xiao Jue did not answer but instead stopped his horse.

Cheng Li Shu greeted with a warm smile: “Isn’t this Brother Zilan[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-16%2F#1)? Why did Brother Zilan come to the academy?”

He was the fourth son of the current Count Shi Jin, Chu Zhao.

“I was just taking a stroll. I happened to come here and did not expect to meet Chief Commander Xiao and Gentleman Cheng here.” Chu Zhao smiled slightly, “Are you also out on a stroll?”

“Naturally. It’s spring time, it wouldn’t do us good if we don’t come out to play.” Cheng Li Shu laughed and muttered, “Although I think it would be more pleasant to go out with a beautiful girl.”

Chu Zhao acted like he didn’t hear it, but his smile remained unchanged.

From the beginning to the end, Xiao Jue hadn’t said a single word to Chu Zhao. He gave him a slight nod and resumed his horse-ride, as though he had only met a stranger.

Once they were out of earshot, a servant grumbled:

“This General Feng Yun is really rude!”

Chu Zhao wasn’t bothered by that in the least. He just shook his head with a smile: “Isn’t this why he is known as Xiao Huai Jin[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-16%2F#2)?” Saying that, he took another look at the empty track. He chuckled lightly, as if he had thought of something interesting.

[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-16%2F#s1) A pet name used for addressing people affectionately.

[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-16%2F#s2) 怀瑾握瑜 (huái jǐn wò yú): Xiao Jue’s courtesy name (Huai Jin) comes from the ninth chapter of ‘The Book of Songs,’ an idiom meaning ‘full of fine qualities.’

# Chapter 17: CLASSMATES

‘I had gone to the drill fields empty-handed but came back with a horse in hand.’

He Yun Sheng couldn’t shake off this thought from his mind. But, for some unknown reason, he felt rather empty at heart, as if he had tied a white wolf with his bare hands.[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-17%2F#1) As soon as he realized this, he reprimanded himself. How dare he think that! This was a gift from his most adored hero!

But… it was just that General Feng Yun’s appearance was even more striking and sophisticated than it was rumoured to be. Could he grow up to become such a man even in a thousand years?

He Sui cast a sidelong glance at He Yun Sheng. His son had a dazed look on his face. He didn’t know where his mind was flying off to yet it was rare to see him in such high spirits. He Sui turned his attention to He Yan again. Although her face was covered with a veil, He Sui could tell that she was lost in thought.

What in the world was wrong with his children?! He Yun Sheng hadn’t uttered a word throughout their walk back home. The reason was obvious—He Yun Sheng was not able to keep his mind off the horse and the person who gifted it to him. But why was He Yan silent? Of course, that young man, Xiao Huai Jin, was young and promising and his daughter was one of the most captivating women in the entire kingdom. Wait… Did his daughter happen to have taken a liking to him? He Sui sincerely prayed that wasn’t the case. He was already in trouble with a certain Fan gongzi but now a young commander has made his appearance! There were countless Young Masters of noble families but there was only one Xiao Huai Jin in the entire dynasty!

He Sui had a headache thinking about this.

The three of them seemed to be lost in their own worlds. The person who sold tofu next door, Aunt Li, was rather curious about what had caused the entire family to behave so peculiarly. She pulled He Sui aside and asked with a voice filled with concern: “Brother He, has something happened at home? Yan Yan and Yun Sheng seem to be very distracted.”

He Sui was at a loss for words.

Qing Mei had already prepared dinner by the time the three of them arrived. As everyone was drinking their own portion of porridge, He Sui suddenly raised a question: “Yan Yan, why did you come to the drill fields today?”

It was understandable in He Yun Sheng’s case but He Yan had never visited the drill fields in her life.

He Yan’s thoughts were interrupted because of the question. She turned to look at He Sui and spoke: “Well, I only wanted to tell father that it was high time Yun Sheng entered the academy. You know very well, simply learning some fist moves and footwork won’t help Yun Sheng’s future. He needs to be trained by an experienced tutor. It’s not too late as spring is the right time to be admitted into the academy. What is father’s opinion on this matter?”

He Sui opened his mouth to answer but had a moment’s hesitation. The truth was, he didn’t know if he was supposed to be glad because his daughter had finally started caring for her brother, or worried, because He Yan’s innocent question had actually rendered him speechless.

“Yan Yan, I have thought about this before… but right now, we are in short of silver,” he said, scratching the back of his head in embarrassment. “Hang in there. Daddy will get a little more silver with this month’s salary.”

Otherwise, he would never have tolerated Zhao gongzi’s insults.

He Yun Sheng had supper with his head lowered but his ears were sharp enough. He was aware that his father suffered a lot to feed the family. He had felt that it would be unfilial of him to put forward such a request. But the words he could not say were finally spoken by He Yan, making He Yun Sheng sigh in relief.

“Daddy need not worry about the silver.” Saying this, He Yan got up from her seat and went to her room. A moment later, she came back with a chest. She opened it, its sparkling contents almost blinded He Sui’s and Qing Mei’s eyes.

The chopsticks in He Sui’s hand fell down with a clatter. Yet, he regained his composure while asking: “Yan Yan. Where did you get this silver? ”

“Yun Sheng won it when he went to Le Tong Gambling House.” He Yan answered fluently.

He Yun Sheng spurted out a mouthful of porridge.

“He Yan…”

He Yan winked at him and her expression didn’t change at all while lying: “Yun Sheng got really lucky. He won a lot of money with his first visit to Le Tong. I have counted them, and the money will be enough for us to last for several years, besides being used for repairs.”

He Yun Shung moved his lips but in the end, was unable to speak up.

What could he say? Could he say that He Yan, a girl, went to gamble? Let alone He Sui, even if he couldn’t comprehend it all. Moreover, He Yan was wearing his clothes that day, and others would only remember her as a teenage boy and not a girl. Besides, whenever he thought of the scene when He Yan stood up for him and raced with Zhao gongzi, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride and heroism.

He was ready to take the blame in return for her favour!

He Yun Sheng chimed in: “Yes, I won this money by gambling. Father, let’s take this silver to the academy! ”

He Sui looked at him with his eyebrows raised: “You won this in the gambling house? Good.

You got such a big win with your first visit? Indeed.”

“Indeed! Indeed!” He Sui flew into a rage and slammed his fist on the table. He picked up a plank lying nearby and started spanking He Yun Sheng, “You unfilial son! You actually dared to go to Le Tong Gambling House! As your father, I worked so hard to feed and clothe you, but how dare you give me Le Tong shit?! Do you want us to lose our face? Don’t you have any respect for your dead mother?”

He Yun Sheng tried to save himself:  “Dad, It’s only because our family is too poor! My dead mother won’t come to know if you don’t tell her!”

“How dare you quibble?! Where did you learn this habit? Going to the gambling house! He Yun Sheng, today I will make you turn over a new leaf!”

He Yan quietly shrank to a corner of the room. She would have been in danger if not for He Yun Sheng taking the blame. What if He Sui came to know that she did it and started spanking her too? What if she accidentally retaliated and injured He Sui? She really would be branded as an ‘unfilial daughter’ then.

After a while, the ‘teaching a lesson’ process came to an end.

He Yun Sheng was punished in the end and the matter was put off. The next step was to decide which academy was suitable for He Yun Sheng. The best choice was to take into account the martial arts training in each academy. Second, the school should neither be a highly reputed one nor one with low standards. The problem with selecting the good schools was that it was mostly attended by sons of rich, noble families. Hence, it would be inevitable that for Yun Sheng to pick up some bad habits there.

\*

While in He Yan’s room, He Yun Sheng fiddled with lampstand and a small comb on the table: “Really, choosing the right school is such a painful task.”

“It’s not something that can be decided overnight.” He Yan glanced at him and said, “We have plenty of time.”

He Yun Sheng’s lips curled: “Aren’t you well-informed? Don’t you know which academy is the best in the capital?”

“I have never visited a library. What could I possibly know?” He Yan said, “But I do know the gambling house.”

He Yun Sheng said, “You are belittling yourself!”

He Yan smiled at him and said, “Thank you.”

Thinking of the beating he had received in vain tonight, He Yun Sheng was frustrated again. “I’ll feed the horse.” Saying this, he immediately left He Yan’s room.

Once He Yun Sheng took his leave, Qing Mei left with the washing basin and He Yan blew out the candle, took off her shoes, and went to bed.

The window was open, but she didn’t feel cold on a spring night like this. Moonlight poured in through the window, brightening her room. Gazing at the silver moonlight, she was immersed in her thoughts about Xiao Jue, who she had met in the daytime.

She was flustered at that time. She was afraid that Xiao Jue would recognize herself, so she lowered her head in a panic. But later she came back to her senses. She was no longer that ‘He Yan’. Xiao Jue would never recognize her even if he had seen her face. Besides she had always adorned a mask, back then.

The last time she saw Xiao Jue, seemed to be a long time ago. At that time, he was not as cold and indifferent as the current Xiao Jue. He was a proud and green young man[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-17%2F#2) who always seemed to be thousands of miles away.

The best academy in the capital was called Xian Chang Hall. The two most renowned generals of the Great Wei Dynasty, General Feng Yun and General Fei Hong, both graduated from here.

To sum up, He Yan and Xiao Jue had been classmates for one year.

[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-17%2F#s1) 空手套白狼: idiom, ‘to tie a wolf with bare hands’; meaning ‘to gain valuable things in exchange for worthless things or even nothing.’

[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-17%2F#s2) 绿少年 (lǜ shào nián): green young man, meaning a young man who is untested in the ways of war, politics, and ruling… It’s a metaphor for a young man or teenager whose youth means that they are inexperienced and unready for the realities of war, like an unripe fruit or a newly sprouted plant.

# Chapter 18: THE FIRST ENCOUNTER

General Fei Hong and General Feng Yun were famous for being conflicting and were always locked in constant strife. However, He Yan always felt it was dramatizing.

They were both young men that joined the army with exceptional military achievements, so they were often pitted against each other. The various rumors that circulated around were just exaggerations to add spice to the story. So the rumors spread until it all became a rather strange tale to tell.

Little He Yan being only fourteen years old, was exceptionally kindhearted and bore no hostility towards Young Master Xiao.

As time passed, she got used to being disguised as a man, so being He Ru Fei was pretty easy. There was only one difficulty, that was, once the young boys reached a certain age, they were to be sent to an academy to learn.

Back then, the lives of men and women were contrasting. Young girls could invite teachers to their homes, whereas boys could not. The He family summoned a teacher to teach their young boy, but as he grew older, they realized that they would be laughed at if anyone else came to know.

Knowing this, they stopped summoning the teacher and sent He Yan to the Xiang Chang Institute to learn when he turned fourteen.

The Xiang Chang Institute was the most prestigious academy in all of the capital city. The founder of the academy was the former crown prince. Students learned the six arts, from teachers who were the leaders of the Imperial Court.

Although the He family had a title of nobility, they were still inferior to the other families in the institute.

Who would have thought He Yuan Liang would have such good luck? One day, when he was at a restaurant, he encountered a dispute and intervened in it, speaking out for one side. Surprisingly, he had helped a teacher who worked at Xiang Chang Institute who had just selected new students. He had even remembered that the He family had an illegitimate son. So to return the favor, he asked him to enroll in the institute.

He Yuan Liang had hesitated a long time concerning this matter. He even discussed it with He Yuan Sheng.

He Yuan Sheng was the type of person who set his heart on pursuing wealth and fame, so he thought the idea was feasible. If He Yan got enrolled in the Xiang Chang Institute, he would be in the company of children who came from reputed noble families. That would give him an edge, and the title alone ‘Xiang Chang Institute’s Student’ would be of great help for his future.

When He Yan heard about this, she was ecstatic.

Even though she cross-dressed, she still followed all the rules women had to. Well, one thing she understood was never to kick a man’s private parts. Well, if you did, better be prepared with your shoes to run. Second was to never appear in public and to practice martial arts hidden from society as it was a patriarchal society. However, she would be deemed an incompetent woman. The daughters of the other noble families learned the piano, chess, calligraphy and painting. It was difficult for He Yan, as she was disguised as He Ru Fei.

Earlier, it seemed like it was impractical, but going to Xiang Chang Institute was different. There were myriad talents there, all of them being the same age as her. If she attended the institute, she could learn from the best while making friends and gaining experience. That was something other women could never be able to do, and she suddenly felt lucky for being able to accept He Ru Fei’s identity.

He Yuan Sheng’s wife, her nominal mother and her great aunt were present when she got the finely crafted mask. They were apprehensive and told her, “You must be careful and never let anybody find out your true identity”.

He Yan nodded.

She did not want to wear the mask. Although being light, it was uncomfortable and stuffy, only revealing her eyes and chin. She had worn this mask for many years; never taking it off, even while sleeping.

The craftsman was very capable. One side of the mask was tucked into the hair and the other was equipped with a mechanism only she could open. If she was sure of one thing, it was that the mask would never fall off even when she was fighting. That showed his mastery.

He *furen* solemnly warned: “If you let others know, our entire family will be doomed. You must remember this!”

He Yan thought: I knew this already. I had been told this a thousand times. The crime of deceiving the Emperor will result in an unimaginable punishment, implicating nine generations of a family.

“I remember.” He Yan replied respectfully but in a somber voice.

He *furen* had an uneasy expression on her face as she followed He Yan to the carriage. She was reluctant to let her go.

In the eyes of outsiders, it was a display of affection and love between a mother and son. He Yan was relieved and filled with joy at the thought of being free. She was finally free from the days where her every move was controlled and watched by others. Her freedom was just around the corner.

The carriage stopped at the gate of Xiang Chang institute. Her servant escorted her off  the carriage and waited by the entrance.

She had reached too early; her teacher had not arrived yet. She could hear the faint voices of students reading, laughing and talking amongst each other. He Yan stepped through the door, full of longing.

The blissful spring sun had come out early. There was a large courtyard and a garden before the entrance to the main hall. Inside the courtyard, there were stables; inside the garden, there were ponds and willow trees.

There was also a swing.

The swing swayed ever so slightly, the wind blowing around it. He Yan reached out at it wanting to sit on it but she didn’t dare. If she sat on it, she was sure to be laughed at. He Yan had to move on.

The willow trees were lush and emerald green colors seemed to be pouring into the pond. The mountains and waters shone and the sun cast a warm glow that made her drowsy. Her vision started to become hazy, so she rubbed her eyes. There was a loquat tree in front of her.

The He family wasn’t short of money and was able to afford loquats. He Yan had eaten loquats before but this was the first time He Yan had seen a loquat tree full of ripened fruits. The glistening, golden fruit seemed to be packed with honey and fragrance. It was a very attractive sight underneath the sun.

Albeit everything, she was still a fourteen-year-old girl who had a lot of fun. Seeing this scene, she remembered the pictures of the young ladies in the yard who used bamboo poles to beat down plums in the summer. Back then, it would’ve been downgrading if the young master of the He family had to pick fruits personally.  However, she wasn’t home. She was at the academy. Surely… it would be fine if she picked a loquat, right? It shouldn’t be disgraceful for a boy to pick a fruit to begin with.

Thinking of this, He Yan rolled up her sleeves and prepared to battle.

She was in a hurry but she only had a pen and a few books that were given by her teacher. There were no poles around her and nothing she could stand on. Fortunately, the loquat tree wasn’t that high. If she jumped, she may be able to reach it.

He Yan stared at the nearest loquat in front of her. The fruit was hanging on the tip of a branch, golden and dazzling as if trying to tempt her into picking it.

She missed.

Almost.

He Yan was not discouraged, and so she continued.

She missed it again..

She has always been somebody that didn’t admit defeat, so she tried again.

She missed, and missed, and missed. She lost count of the times she was defeated. When He Yan was about to give up due exhaustion, she heard a chuckle from up above her head.

He Yan looked up.

The loquat tree’s branches were bursting with leaves and fruits. She was so focused on the loquats that she didn’t notice the person sitting on the tree.

She didn’t know how long he had been sitting there, watching her. She looked up at him, and the sunlight shone down, basking his face in a golden glow.

There was a beautiful young man in a white robe and golden boots. His expression was lazy and his arrogance was evident. His head was propped up by his hands, and his beautiful eyes made her heart pound.

He Yan was dumbfounded.

She had never seen such a good-looking young man before. It seemed like spring was being reflected onto him. For a while, she felt ashamed. Fortunately, the mask covered her blushing face, but it couldn’t cover the shine in her eyes.

After the handsome boy glanced at her as he pulled a fruit down.

He suddenly turned over and fell to the ground, his white robe swaying in the wind. She watched as the young man approached her with the fruit, not knowing what to say.

Should she say thank you? Or that he looked handsome?

She was so nervous, and so she reached out and started playing with her robe.

The young man stopped before her and smiled.

When he smiled, it seemed like spring had come once again, and the flowers were blooming. He Yan said with excitement, “Th-…”

Before the ‘Thanks’ was finished, the other party passed by her and walked away.

He Yan was dumbstruck.

She looked back and saw that the white-robed young man was throwing the golden-yellow loquat up and down as he walked forward with a leisurely posture, as if mocking her self-indulgence.

He Yan stood there trying to calm her pounding heart, and then proceeded to follow the young man inside the academy.

However, as she passed by the entrance, she heard someone with a lively and cheerful voice ask, “I heard that the new young master of the He family came here to study today. Brother Huai Jin, did you see him?”

She took a step forward and heard a lazy voice answer, “I didn’t see the young master of the He family. I only saw somebody who was stupid and short.”

St-stupid and short?

He Yan hasn’t been so disappointed in her entire life. Stupid was one thing, but short?

How was she short? Her stature was excellent among girls the same age as her!

He Yan wanted to see the person that had reached such a conclusion. When she looked up, she saw the young man who was surrounded by a crowd of young people. His eyes were shining as if he hadn’t said anything.

It seemed like he knew she was staring at him.

Bursts of laughter rang throughout the main hall.

The world was full of greenery, beautiful scenery, signs of spring and alluring flowers.

This was her first encounter with Xiao Jue.

# Chapter 19: NEGATIVE PEOPLE

It rained the very next day.

He Yan asked He Yun Sheng to grab some money to hire a craftsman to repair the dilapidated roof. Spring was nearing its end and summer was approaching. Chances of rain would only increase, and the roof of her room was the only one intact in the He family’s house. Both He Sui’s and He Yun Sheng’s rooms had copper pots strewn all over the floor to catch the dripping water droplets, and upon entering their rooms, it looked rather like they were selling pots.

The roof was quickly repaired with solid green tiles. He Yan pondered for a while and changed the quilt and pillows in the house as they had cotton peeking out at some places.

He Yun Sheng stepped into the house and beckoned, “He Yan, come and take a look.”

He Yan was baffled when she saw He Yun Sheng pull out a piece of paper from his bosom and told her, “Yesterday, I wrote down all the academies in the capital that are still viable. Would you like to check them out together today?”

“Now?” He Yan asked. “Are you asking me to come with you?”

He Yun Sheng’s face flushed a little with annoyance as he turned his back to her, “I just told you.”

“Oh, well, then how about I accompany you?” He Yan replied.

This young man had an awkward temperament, but he was quite cute and relatively harmless. When He Yan walked into the yard, she saw that the horse Xiao Jue had given He Yun Sheng yesterday was standing in the corner, and He Yun Sheng had also built it a simple stable.

The family, being poor, was unable to raise horses. Only chickens and ducks had been raised in the yard. At this time, there was a giant animal, which was really strange. The horse was eating grass with its head down, the forge wiped clean and the yard neat and tidy.

Seeing He Yan looking at the horse, He Yun Sheng proudly praised, “Xiang Xiang[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-19%2F#1) is very beautiful.”

He Yan almost doubted that she had heard it wrong, “What did you call it?”

“Xiang Xiang!” He Yun Sheng replied matter-of-factly, not noticing her tone as he continued, “I noticed yesterday that she’s a female horse. Since she’s with me now, I’ve given her another name. Xiang Xiang is a name that girls will definitely like.”

He Yan: “… as long as you’re happy.”

He Yan had already advised him to study more, but He Yun Sheng refused to listen. If a person as fastidious as Xiao Jue found out that the horse he had casually gifted was given such a name by He Yun Sheng, it would definitely be the ultimate disgrace in his horse-giving career.

He Yun Sheng didn’t feel that there was anything wrong with the name. Though he tried hard to hide it, he couldn’t stop being happy; and He Yan was too lazy to be bothered about him.

The He family didn’t have any horses before and naturally no horse-carriages, so He Yan and He Yun Sheng both walked on the streets with umbrellas above their heads. He Sui went to the drill fields early in the morning. After He Yan got up in the morning, she saw that the bruises at the corner of her mouth had healed up and were barely visible, so she decided to go out without wearing a veil.

There were no benefits in going out while wearing a veil. Now that she had a different identity, she could observe the town without worrying. After careful selection, He Yun Sheng noted down the names of a total of four schools on the paper. When He Yan looked at it, she found that those schools gave most priority to martial arts.

That was good, too. With his appearance, He Yun Sheng didn’t seem like he intended to take the civil service route——then again, he really wasn’t made for that kind of job, otherwise he wouldn’t have named his horse ‘Xiang Xiang.’

The two shopped and ate to their hearts’ fill, but managed to visit all the schools on the list in a day. After they discussed the schools, they decided to choose the one nearest to their home. This school had more martial arts masters and the homework was also arranged properly. He could also go to the school to practice martial arts after completing his studies. The tuition was not extravagant, just one or two tales of silver a year. The money that He Yan had won, would be enough for him to go to school for several years.

Although He Yun Sheng didn’t say it, he was obviously ecstatic. On the way back, he even skipped a little as he walked. When they passed by a tailor shop, He Yan suddenly remembered He Yun Sheng’s coat that she had torn up at Le Tong. After thinking about it, she said, “I had agreed to sew you clothes before. Since we’re already here, doing it today is better than waiting for tomorrow. Let’s check it here.”

Most of He Yun Sheng’s clothes were He Sui’s hand-me-downs, which had been stitched and mended repeatedly for at least three years, with very few new clothes. He had never before set foot in a tailor shop, so when he heard her words, he hesitated, “Forget it, I can just wear the clothes I have.”

“You will be going to the academy. If you don’t carry yourself well, you will be ridiculed.” Saying this, He Yan dragged him inside the shop. The old tailor smiled kindly, “Are the clothes being made for the young girl or the young boy?”

“Do it for him,” He Yan pointed to He Yun Sheng. “Clothes for both spring and winter seasons, preferably long-sleeved and long trousers. Better looking and suitable for a young man like him. Don’t use too deep colours but don’t use very light colours either. The pattern can be kept simple.”

The old tailor smiled and answered in affirmative.

“What about you?” He Yun Sheng was shocked and stood up, “I can’t wear all those. They’re too much.”

He Yan pushed him back onto the chair, “I have a lot of clothes to wear, my wardrobe is already full, how can you compare with me? After all, you look so dashing. It would be such a waste of your handsome face if you don’t dress well.”

He Yun Sheng flushed red. “What nonsense are you talking about?”

When the old tailor heard the words, his smile widened, “Young man, your sister loves you a lot.”

Love? He Yun Sheng was a bit dazed. He had never expected to shop with He Yan like this one day, just like other siblings. But… she did help him a lot. She was reluctant to spend money on making clothes for her herself, but she did so much for him. Everyone knew He Yan was the one who liked to dress the most.

He Yan didn’t know He Yun Sheng’s inner thoughts were jumbled up right now. She was just thinking that she couldn’t wear the clothes of the original owner of the body as they were way too charming and was not of He Yan’s taste. Every time she wore those long skirts, she fell down after stepping on the corner of the clothes. Whenever she had to hold the hem of her clothes, her face would be filled with despair.

Even when she was living at the Xu family, her clothes were always simple and elegant. Therefore the original owner’s clothes were not suitable for her. Not to mention that she couldn’t even practice martial arts in those clothes. She thought that it would be better if she asked the tailor to make two sets of male clothes, but it should not be in front of He Yun Sheng, otherwise, she would have to spend an infinite amount of time explaining it. She would have to do it when she is alone, secretly.

While the tailor was measuring He Yun Sheng, He Yan was walking around looking at the bolts of fabric intending to pick one or two pieces for him. At that moment, someone called her name.

“He Yan?”

He Yan turned around to take a look.

After she turned around to look, she saw an extremely handsome and richly-dressed youth, whose appearance was fair, but his eyes had a hint of black and blue underneath them, making him appear sullen. Tailing after him were a few young manservants. Seeing He Yan turn around, his eyes lit up and he suddenly dashed ahead to grab her hands.

He Yan swiftly avoided his hands.

Seemed like the original owner was quite famous in the town. He Yan was going insane, internally, discovering acquaintances wherever she went, first that Wang Jiu Gui, and now this one.

The youth was shocked when He Yan avoided his hand, but then immediately looked crestfallen, holding his chest where his heart was, “You… are still mad at me?”

What did that mean?

He Yan was still quite lost, but a young calf-like boy had already rushed out like a whirlwind and blocked He Yan’s way.

“Fan Cheng you dare to come!”

‘Fan?’ He Yan came to a sudden conclusion. This person was the legendary ‘Fan gongzi’, the ex-lover of the original He Yan.

[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-19%2F#s1) 香 (xiāng): xiang literally means ‘fragrant, aromatic, sweet smelling.’ A weird name for a horse lol

# Chapter 20: NEVER MEET AGAIN

He Yun Sheng stood in front of He Yan, blocking Fan Cheng from approaching her.

Fan Cheng was a little surprised.

This pair of siblings had always had a bad relationship. He and He Yan had known each other for a very long time and he had almost never seen an occasion where both of them appeared at the same time. Even if it happened once, at that time, both of them were arguing with each other.

But now, when he took a look at both of them, they didn’t seem to be arguing, but rather, He Yun Sheng was protecting He Yan. Did something happen between the two of them that he didn’t know about?

He turned his attention to He Yan again, and she also stared at him, her clear eyes were full of frankness, without much affection, and it didn’t look like she had any feelings left for him in her heart.

Fan Cheng took another step forward and asked with some concern and anxiety, “I heard that you were seriously ill a few days ago. I wonder if you are feeling okay now… would you like me to buy you some supplements? What do you like? I think you seem to be thinner, hence I don’t feel at ease.”

This man was quite good-looking, well-dressed, and quite passionate. If the original He Yan was here, then she was afraid that she would have been touched by him.

He Yan hadn’t had time to speak yet, when He Yun Sheng forestalled her, afraid that she would be moved by Fan Cheng’s few words and said, “Don’t listen to the nonsense that he is spouting! Don’t forget who caused you to be seriously ill, and the words they said at the door of the Fan family! This man is a liar! A cheat!”

He Yan had heard He Yun Sheng say this before. When the original He Yan learnt that her sweetheart would marry his wife, she went to ask for an explanation from him. As a result, she wasn’t even allowed to enter the household as she was directly swept aside by the Fan family servants in front of the door, not even catching a glimpse of Fan Cheng’s face.

Fan Cheng hated He Yan for wanting too many things in his heart, but he didn’t show any of the hatred on his face and continued explaining himself, “It was my parents’ decision. This matter was set by my parents for me, I have no right to choose. You should know who is in your heart, so why listen to outsiders?”

“Who did you call an outsider?!” He Yun Sheng was furious, “I’m her brother! What is your relationship with her? Don’t even think about taking advantage of her!”

He Yan patted He Yun Sheng’s shoulder and motioned him to calm down. She then turned to Fan Cheng and said, “Thank you, Fan *gongzi* for coming, but I am no longer sick. In the last few days, it was just a matter of a cold.”

Fan Cheng didn’t expect her to say so and he suddenly was at a loss for words.

“Whatever happened in the past has already turned into a cloud of smoke. You have now been married and have your own family. It is really inappropriate for a woman to be so close to a man, and it will upset your wife. In the future, let’s not have anything to do with each other and never meet again.”

He Yan thoughtfully said this, which did not hurt the face of the young man. Looking at He Yun Sheng, he seemed to be satisfied with her remarks.

Fan Cheng looked at He Yan carefully.

Speaking of which, he and He Yan had met totally by chance.

In all fairness, He Yan was pretty but without brains. There were many people of this kind around here. He Yan was only interested in his family background and wanted to live a life of comfort. When the fat meat was delivered directly to his mouth, there was no reason for him to not accept it. Fan Cheng thought that it was good to take her in as his concubine based on her appearance.

Who knew that He Yan was so ambitious and arrogant that she was aiming for the position of his main wife?

How could he marry the daughter of a drill field officer? He Yan was delusional, but in order to deceive her, Fan Cheng also kept on coaxing her, sending her some valuable cosmetics and jewellery which made her ecstatic.

Who knew that when He Yan learned that he was about to marry a wife, she would go to his house to kick up a tantrum? His married wife was Cheng Lang’s eldest daughter. If Cheng Lang knew that, they might have cancelled the marriage. So Fan Cheng told his servants to deal with He Yan.

Even after he learned that He Yan was very sad at that time and even tried to kill herself in front of the door of his house, he was too lazy to care about her. Afterwards, he married his wife and everything went well.

After his newly-married phase was over, Fan Cheng reverted back to his old self. But his new wife was very fierce and he was tightly controlled. He could not go to brothels like before. Even a few of his concubines were dismissed. At that time, Fan Cheng started to miss He Yan.

He Yan’s temperament was different from his fierce wife. She was easy to coax, although sometimes he needed to give her gifts and play cute. Fan Cheng asked some of his people to go to He Yan’s place only to know that she was seriously ill after she left the Fan Manor that day. After she recovered, she often didn’t go out alone. She and her brother occasionally went Zui Yu Restaurant to sell Da Nai cakes.

He didn’t expect to meet them here.

He Yan seemed to be different from before.

He noticed that her expression was not as pleasing and charming as it used to be, and she was kind of speaking frankly. Still the same eyebrows, but with a little more vitality, along with a bit of heroism that was not there before. It was this kind of heroism that made her beautiful face seem very different. Even the polite smile on her lips made people unable to blink their eyes and keep staring.

“You’re still mad at me.” Fan Cheng said glumly.

He was sure that He Yan was also interested in him. She used to like him a lot before, how could she suddenly have no feelings for him? As long as he apologized to her and gave her some gifts, she would forgive him. For a woman like her, it was more than enough for him to persuade her by saying a few sugar-coated words. He could swear to the heavens and she would even die for him.

He Yan didn’t know what was going through Fan Cheng’s mind. She had already expressed everything clearly to him. She turned back and asked the old tailor, “Has the size been measured?”

The old tailor nodded and said yes.

“This is the deposit,” He Yan put the money on the desk, “When will it be done?”

“Twenty days later, spring and summer clothes will be done. But winter clothes will take more time, a little more than a month.”

“Okay.” He Yan smiled, “We’ll be here twenty days later to take it, please make it more fashionable.” She pointed to He Yun Sheng and said, “Little children love pretty things.”

“Who loves pretty things?!” He Yun Sheng immediately became indignant.

The old tailor smiled and nodded his head again.

He Yan and He Yun Sheng strode out of the tailor shop after bidding Fan Cheng farewell.

When Fan Cheng wanted to say something, He Yan had already walked away, but He Yun Sheng turned his head, and secretly waved his fist, his eyes full of warning.

“Oh.” Fan Cheng sneered.

“Young master, Miss He Yan, this time to you…” The servant was very upset.

 “No problem.” Fan Cheng waved his hand, “She is just a little angry.”

Today’s He Yan was very different from the past one. Fan Cheng suddenly thought that he had spent so much time on her, but in fact, he had never taken advantage of her.

How could he let something that was already his escape from his grasp? Since they met here today, why not continue and do good things together?

Fan Cheng’s face broke into a victorious smile.

**E/N:**It’s a bit mean to be reborn.

# Chapter 21: CONSCRIPTION DOCUMENT

On the way back, He Yun Sheng could not stop observing He Yan’s face.

“You won’t keep getting yourself involved that one surnamed Fan, will you?” He confirmed repeatedly.

“I promise you, I will never associate with him again,” He Yan assured him. “Is it alright?”

Seeing her firm attitude, He Yun Sheng was a little relieved.

He Yun Sheng didn’t know what was going on in He Yan’s head. He chatted the entire way back home, more like a grandma than a youth.

“It’s not that I don’t believe you. It’s just that, that one surnamed Fan is too cunning and liable to lie.” He Yun Sheng continued talking to himself, “What’s so good about a man like him? You were blind when you first saw him. If you ask me, General Feng Yun is the one who is truly worthy of admiration……”

Unbeknownst to He Yun Sheng, his murmuring was heard by He Yan. She let the words enter one ear and leave through the other. But when she heard the last statement, she suddenly interjected, “What does this have to do with Xiao Jue?”

“Isn’t the Xiao family’s second son handsome?” He Yun Sheng probed.

Not only was he handsome, but his demeanour and bearing were also delicate and neat.

“Well…… handsome.”

“What about his family background?”

As for his family, General Xiao, Xiao Zhong Wu was the Emperor’s beloved general who accompanied him to countless battles throughout ten thousand miles of rivers and mountains and was together with him in victory and defeat. Not only that, his wife was also the Empress Dowager’s niece. As for his two sons, the eldest became a senior official/doctor at a very young age. The second son, Xiao Jue, was now a chief commander and his status was sky-rocketing. He was the well-known General Feng Yun.

“Very good.”

“What about his cultural and military strategies?”

“……one in a million. Superb!”

“This is what I don’t understand.” He Yun Sheng came up with a conclusion, “This man, who is not only so handsome but is also from a golden household with no flaws, is he not worth admiring? If I were a woman, I would admire only him my whole life!”

He Yan: “……you can just be quiet.”

Although Xiao Jue had thousands of good aspects, that indifferent, cold and irritating temperament of his was very uncomfortable. Add to it a huge bunch of women who were crazy for him, despite his cold temper. She guessed that there was no woman admired by him until then. Did that guy even give a second glance to a woman? The answer would be a big ‘no’. That man was extremely arrogant, and his expectations were as high as the sky. She suspected that even she couldn’t catch up to him.

One had to wonder what kind of beautiful girl he would choose in the future, a peerless beauty that could make the gaudy swallows and orioles pale with envy[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-21%2F#1).

He Yan was looking forward to it.

He Yun Sheng suddenly stopped walking, “What is going on over there?”

Not far away, was a notice posted on the stone wall beside the road, and quite a few people were gathered around it. He Yan and He Yun Sheng walked a little closer to it to see what was written on the notice. As they went near, they got to know what it was.

 “It turned out to be a conscription document.”

“It hasn’t been that long since they recruited troops. Why are they suddenly recruiting troops again?”

He Yun Sheng asked suspiciously.

Unlike He Yun Sheng, He Yan was clear on this matter. She had spent several years with Xiao Jue settling the chaos of West and South but ignored the neighbouring Uto. The people of Uto, no longer able to hide their ambitious nature, took advantage of the years of development and growth. Even after marrying into the Xu family, she had been paying attention to the northwest fortress. This conscription document was about going to Liang Zhou; to station recruits and train them.

He Yun Sheng looked at the conscription notice, tore it from the wall and kept the ripped part with him.

He Yan said, “What are you doing?”

 “……Nothing, just want to keep it as a memorial.” He Yun Sheng continued, “Unfortunately, I am not strong enough now to go and fight to kill the enemy. In the future, when the level of my martial arts is higher, I will go and join the army.”

He Yan smiled, “Joining the army is not an easy task. You have to suffer from the wind and sand, watching the sacrifices of the people around you. On the battlefield, you have to be prepared to die at any time. You don’t even dare to kill the fish…… how are you going to kill the enemy?”

He Yun Sheng was struck dumb. He spoke after a while, “You are speaking as if you have been there.”

He Yan didn’t say anything and continued walking home with him. She tilted her head down and smiled.

Of course, she had been there, when she was the same age as He Yun Sheng.

At that time, the Fu Yue Army was recruiting troops to Mo Xian. After arguing with her adoptive father, He Yuan Sheng, again, she secretly packed some silver and clothes, concealed herself using a mask and left for the army in the middle of the night.

She had used He Ru Fei’s name to join the army.

No one, including the He family, expected that He Yan would go join the army. It wasn’t until He Yan fought her first victorious battle, was promoted to an official position and received the rewards, did this matter reach the ears of the He family.

The time she joined the army was not as smooth-sailing as others thought. She was a teenager, still a girl cross-dressing as a teenage boy, had to be careful not to be disowned, and had to compete with men who were stronger than she was. On the battlefield, even more so, as she couldn’t cry nor utter a complaint. She was often scolded by generals, and many a time couldn’t even say anything when she was being robbed of military honors, and despite this, she had to laugh and pour tea with her superiors.

He Yan felt that before joining the army she was a dumb, indifferent little girl who hid everything in her heart but after joining the army, she learned to grow up.

Outside of life and death, everything else was trivial, and living was what mattered most. General Fei Hong had replaced the He family’s young lady, and since then she had persevered step by step, her suffering unspeakable to others.

Thinking about it, the name of General Fei Hong was closely related to her life. So close that when she saw the ripped conscription document in He Yun Sheng’s hands, she was not as calm as she seemed.

He Yan’s sudden silence was noticed by He Yun Sheng, who thought that she was still thinking about Fan Cheng’s matters. After returning home, he asked He Yan to go back to fer room.

Qing Mei had long since retired, and the notice that He Yun Sheng had torn was still placed on the table, under the oil lamp. The thin paper weighed heavily on He Yan’s heart.

Having been busy with matters regarding the He family for so long, now that there was money and that He Yun Sheng had found a school, she could plan for herself. But, how was she going to approach He Ru Fei? This was the biggest problem. As of that day, she had no power and her words carried no weight. If she went to fight against those people, no one would listen to what she said.

In her last life, when she was living as He Ru Fei, and later on as Mistress Xu, she only knew how to fight with the sword and had no idea about anything related to conspiracies. Even now after being reborn, she still couldn’t do those dirty and insidious things.

What did she have? She only had this life. What could she do? All she could do was fight and kill the enemy.

But what could she do at this moment?

He Yan’s eyes fell on the conscription notice, and those few lines of words brought up a surge of emotions that had been bottled up in her heart till then, and she felt as if she had returned to her fifteen-year-old self. Having made the decision, taking advantage of the darkness of the night, she took some silver and tied a bundle of cloth on her back as she ran into the army camp. Once she reached there, she immediately wrote down her name and began her new career in the army.

Everything had to be done again, from scratch.

It was the worst way but also the best.

She was going to start from square one, but this time with her own name, He Yan.

[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-21%2F#s1) 莺惭燕妒: make the gaudy swallows and orioles pale with envy (idiom); fig. so beautiful that even swallows and orioles feel jealous of her

# Chapter 22: THE AFFAIR

For the next ten days or so, it was calm and quiet.

The roof of the house was repaired and the quilt was changed. He Yan went to find a young manservant for He Yun Sheng who could help him to carry things and run errands. Qing Mei could also have a partner to talk with at home.

He Yun Sheng had already handed over his responsibilities to his servant and started going to academy every day, leaving He Yan alone in the house. In the absence of He Sui, He Yan was accompanied by Qing Mei and could always practice sword fighting in the yard…… ahem, with broken branches.

Her skills were engraved in her mind, but the body was really weak. Even if she fell down a little, the bruises that formed were rather obvious. Although He Yan diligently practiced everyday, her strength was not great. Compared to the past, it was still lacking.

It was a given that she couldn’t go to the battlefield with a weak body. She sighed in her heart and laid down the branch.

“Miss, Miss,” Qing Mei trotted in, “Someone was here to deliver something again.”

He Yan frowned, “Who was it?”

“This servant doesn’t know. They just delivered the things and left.” Qing Mei was very embarrassed. “Miss, what should we do now? When the Young Master comes back from the academy, he will surely be enraged.”

It was none other than the servants of the Fan family who came to deliver things. Since the day he saw He Yan in the tailor’s shop, Fan Cheng had sent his servants to deliver things every now and then. It was always rouge powder, satin, jewelry or tonic soup.

He Yan asked Fan Cheng’s servant to return back every time when they came to deliver something. He Yun Sheng always got furious whenever he came to know about the matter and would annoy He Yan by constantly yelling in her room. Because of this He Yan stopped going out these days for fear that she might run into Fan Cheng again thereby causing He Yun Sheng to raise the roof[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-22%2F#1) of the Fan family.

But today they were being excessive, what did they mean by leaving after putting things down? Were they confident that she would accept them whole-heartedly?

He Yan ordered, “Throw the things out.”

“But,” Qing Mei reluctantly said, “They are all expensive satin and jewelry…… throwing them out would be a big deal.”

He Yan felt a headache.

For heaven’s sake, she had lived her last life like a man and never met such a stubborn suitor. Although she later returned to the He family and was betrothed to Xu Zhi Hheng, Xu Zhi Heng never went out of line, and even alienated her, let alone reach such a degree of ingratiation. She did not know how other girls could deal with this type of situation.

What if such valuable things were thrown away, and the Fan family didn’t come to realize it?

He Yan sighed and conceded, “I will send them back myself.”

Qing Mei’s eyes were wide open in shock and replied,  “Does the Miss want to go to the door of the Fan mansion?”

“Is there any other way?” He Yan said, “Why don’t you pack up and come with me?”

“Do you want this maid to accompany you?” Qing Mei shrank for a moment.

“Of course.” He Yan looked at her strangely, “I can’t remember the way to the Fan mansion.”

She was not the original He Yan, that was why she didn’t know the way to the Fan mansion. Naturally, she had to find someone to lead the way. However, looking at the appearance of Qing Mei lingering in fear, it became obvious that her last visit to the Fan mansion must have not been very pleasant.

Qing Mei was really truly perturbed. She recalled the last time she accompanied He Yan to the Fan family. He Yan’s eyes were red from crying and she had almost been killed in the Fan mansion. At that time, the madam of the Fan family had peered down at them and had condescendingly remarked, “People should know their own places instead of always thinking of climbing high branches and staring at the impossible things, so as not to fall and be ridiculed.”

The irony inside and out of the story was really harsh. Finally, He Yan had lost her breath and fainted. He Sui had asked the doctor to come and visit her. The doctor had said that she collapsed due to cardiac arrest. At that time, everyone thought that He Yan was doomed to die after this attack and would not make it. They didn’t expect that when she woke up, she seemed to turn into a totally different person, not even mentioning Fan Cheng at all.

Even though Fan Cheng came to pester her Miss, she never entangled herself with him and tried to make a clear-break.

Qing Mei was a little relieved, but she was still concerned. He Yan patted her on the shoulder and comforted her, “Don’t worry, no one will bully you.”

Qing Mei inexplicably felt at ease.

The two of them left together. The Fan family lived far away from the He family, and it took them a long time to get there. Qing Mei pointed to the scarlet gate of a house and said, “This is the Fan mansion.”

He Yan thought for a moment and said, “It’s not convenient for me to go over there. You take these things and give them to the gatekeeper. Tell him that they were sent by Fan gongzi to the He family, and that they must be handed over to Fan gongzi.”

Qing Mei nodded, “This servant understands.”

He Yan then hid behind the pillar facing the street and watched Qing Mei walking to the guard. She conveyed her Miss’ orders and gave the basket containing the gift to the guard. She returned to He Yan, smiling, “This servant has said everything!”

“Well done,” He Yan said, “Let’s go back.”

\*

In the main house of the Fan family, because of the recent marriage, the layout of the house was still red and festive. Tang Ying, Cheng Wu Lang’s eldest daughter, was spoiled and domineering from childhood. Because of the relationship with Lord Tang, the Fan family had to spoil her. Now she has just been married into the Fan family for a few months and had become the head of the Fan family from both inside and out.

The pageboy knocked at the door.

“Come in.” Tang Ying was sitting on the soft couch, admiring the embroidery she had just made.

After the boy came in, he kowtowed to Tang Ying, and then said, “Madam, a servant girl just came outside the door and sent in a basket and said she wanted to give it to the young master.”

When Tang Ying heard this she made a movement and looked at the boy, “Servant girl? What basket? Bring it here and let me a look.”

The boy carried the basket forward.

Tang Ying picked it up and fiddled with it a few times, and when she saw that it was full of women’s satin cloth and rouge powder, she became furious, “What is this?”

The young man dared not speak.

The maid next to her said, “These are all things for women, Madam. The young master doesn’t use these, so it must be……”

“It must be that he wanted to fawn over some lady, and she returned them to him!” Tang Ying stood up abruptly and brushed the porcelain cups off the table, and the porcelain crackled all over the floor. She looked ferocious and said, “Fan Cheng, this bastard!”

The maid reminded her, “Madam, it’s not impossible to investigate the young master, but you must not give him a chance to be alert.”

Tang Ying calmed down a little and then said, “That’s right. There’s no reason to guard against thieves for a thousand days.[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-22%2F#2) If she was from a good family, how could she collude with Fan Cheng? I think that slut was just trying to get him. Damn it!”

She instructed the boy who kept his head down, “From today onward, you are to follow Fan Cheng. See where he goes and who he meets. You are to report everything directly to me. I would like to see what kind of fox has enchanted him. I want to meet that bitch…… I must make this couple pay a hefty price!”

The young man nodded his head and retreated.

The servant girl persuaded, “Madam, calm down. We must remain indifferent so as to prevent any suspicion. If the young master got suspicious, he might hide the woman.”

“I know.” Tang Ying clenched her fists tightly. “In the past, when I dismissed his beautiful concubines, he never uttered a  word, but now I see that he has become so fearless that he is not taking even me, his rightful wife, in his eyes.”

[1](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-22%2F#s1) to raise the roof: It means to be extremely noisy and boisterous, complain loudly and angrily.

[2](read://https_phoenixwalktranslations.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fphoenixwalktranslations.com%2Frebirth-of-a-star-general-chapter-22%2F#s2) No reason to guard against thieves for a thousand days:  It means people have limited energy, let alone coping passively, which consumes more energy. It is difficult to achieve long-term prevention, and there are always times of negligence.

# Chapter 23: PEACH BLOSSOM DEBT

The capital was not a small place, and it was not a simple matter to find someone.

Nowadays, however, as the concubines had all been dismissed, Fan *gongzi*did not dare go to the brothels, thus, there were very few places that he went to everyday. Soon, Fan *gongzi*‘s secret was discovered by Tang Ying.

“Unreasonable!” Tang Ying slammed the tea cup that she held in her hands on the table, “When both families were discussing the marriage, he had an affair with an outside woman. This man simply does not have me in his eyes. My brother had told me before that this person was unreliable, and now it has been proven true.”

“Madam, be at ease,” said the maid, “The young master still does not dare bring the woman into the house, which shows that there are still some scruples. It’s because this woman knows how to control a man’s heart, which is why the young master made a mistake. Now, the madam and the young master are newly married couple. And this matter has attracted other’s jealousy.”

“Then what do you think I should do?” Tang Ying asked angrily.

“It’s better to start with this woman, but she’s just the daughter of a drill field officer, and it’s beneath madam to handle her…”

“You are right.” Tang Ying calmed down after a while, “She is just a lowly woman, but she is delusional to think that she can marry into the Fan family and become a wife. I will meet her in person.”

He Yan, on the other hand, had no idea about these twists and turns that took place in the Fan family. She thought about how to take care of the paperwork at the conscription office so that she could teach herself, in order to enter the barracks and go to Liang Zhou.

He Yun Sheng and He Sui could not be notified about the situation and for this she needed to find a good excuse. If she said that she wanted more achievements——they would think she had gone crazy. If she said revenge… forget it, it still wouldn’t work.

She tossed and turned around in bed while she thought how similar the matter was when she had previously run away from home. That night, there was no moon and the wind was fast.

She knew that the conscription would come to end in the next two days, so if the documents were not filled in properly, she would lose this chance.

As she thought about it, Qing Mei came in carrying a cake in her hands, and was shocked to see He Yan tossing and turning in the bed, “Young miss, you have been lying in the bed since noon, did you eat something bad? This servant will quickly go and find someone to take a look at Miss.”

“It’s okay.” He Yan waved her hand, “It’s just that I am bored.”

Not to mention, when He Yun Sheng was at home, it would be very noisy. Now that he went to school, He Yan felt bored. Even if she practised martial arts in the house, it still did not relieve her boredom. He Yan felt that people were really strange.

She lived in the Xu family house for a whole year and she used to feel lonely, but she was already used to it. But after she came here, she was accustomed to having He Yun Sheng around her, and now that she was alone for more than a month, she felt forlorn.

It was probably only He Yun Sheng whom she could say this about.

He Yan turned over and said to Qing Mei, “I am going out for a while.”

“Where is the young miss going? This servant will accompany you.” Qing Mei said hurriedly.

“It’s okay. I’m going to get He Yun Sheng’s clothes at the tailor shop.” He Yan replied. It had already been twenty days. He Yun Sheng’s summer and spring clothes should be ready. Since He Yun Sheng was at the school, she wanted to help him pick it up.

Before she left, she glanced at the conscription notice on the table, and after musing for a moment, she slid the notice in her sleeves, without knowing why she wanted to do this.

A long time later, in the future, when He Yan recalled this scene today, she only felt that fate was very mysterious. Since she picked up the notice, the wheels of fate overturned the clouds and rains, and swept her into the game again.

It was already afternoon, and the weather was good. He Yan reached the tailor shop with the help of her memory. The old tailor in the shop recognized He Yan when she came in and smiled at her, “You are finally here. These clothes are ready. The boy didn’t come today?”

“He went to school.” He Yan smiled, as she handed over the remaining silver, “Master is good at craftsmanship.”

*The spring and summer clothes are beautifully sewn, the style is simple and the material is also light weight and would look elegant on He Yun Sheng when he wears this,*He Yan thought. He Yun Sheng would definitely like it. She folded the two pieces of clothes and placed them in the bag before stepping out of the tailor shop. Just as she stepped out, a strange maid came forward.

“Are you Miss He Yan?”

*Did I meet yet another acquaintance of the original owner of this body?* He Yan sighed in her heart, but since He Yun Sheng was not around, she did not know who this person was.

“Exactly.” He Yan tried to make herself look more natural.

The maid smiled and said, “My lady is just around here. I wanted to invite you to talk about something with my lady.”

*Your lady?*He Yan thought for a moment. She was not the real He Yan, and if that person was an old acquaintance of the original He Yan, she may expose herself. After she decided, she declined the maid’s offer, “It would be inconvenient for me today. Is it fine if we meet another day?”

The maid was embarrassed, “This servant cannot decide anything about this matter, please come with me to see my lady. It won’t take a lot of time and my lady wants to talk about something important with you.”

In this life, He Yan was most afraid of the getting the He family into any sort of danger because of her. The maid looked so embarrassed that He Yan felt like she was causing trouble for her, so her heart couldn’t help but soften. When she heard that the other person wanted to talk about something important, He Yan’s heart jumped up, thinking, *If it really is an important matter then what can I do if I don’t know anything about it?*

After He Yan struggled for a moment, she said, “Well… I’ll go with you. But I still have something to do and thus won’t be able to stay for long.”

“Don’t worry.” The maid replied.

The maid led the way and He Yan gazed at the maid in front of her. Although this woman claimed to be a servant and even had the appearance of one, her garments were of high quality, and even the jewelry that she wore did not look ordinary. At the very least, the maid of an ordinary family could not be like her. Either she was the maid of a big family, or the maid of a rich lady. But, according to He Yan, she could be both.

As she was thinking, He Yan found out that they had arrived at a small alley.

“Your lady is here?” He Yan asked.

“Our lady has a house here but she rarely lives here.” The maid continued to speak with a smile, “Occasionally, the nearby restaurant holds little banquets here.”

*Oh…it really is a big family.* Even the members had their own houses. He Yan was speechless in her heart. If He Yun Sheng knew this, he would probably be envious for a long time.

“It’s here.” The maid stopped in front of a house.

The house was not big and even looked a bit old. There were no people around this street——not even a gatekeeper stood at the door.

He Yan went in after the maid, after she passed the garden, the maid brought her in a hall. After she came here, the maid suddenly dropped her gentle façade and said coldly to the other person in the hall, “Madam, this servant has brought that person here.”

He Yan raised her head and her eyes came in contact with an angry face.

“You are He Yan?”

This didn’t look like a meeting between old friends.

“I am, and you are…?”

“I am the eldest daughter of Cheng Wu Lang and the wife of Fan Cheng.” The lady replied fiercely with a sneer.

He Yan realized what was going on in an instant and she secretly sighed in her heart while she looked at the maid.

This lady seemed to have misunderstood something.

*What kind of sin had she committed in her previous life to be reborn as a rotten peach girl?*

# Chapter 24: SAVING A LIFE

After a moment of silence, He Yan opened her mouth, “Madam seems to have misunderstood something.”

All was good until He Yan said nothing, but when she did, Tang Ying became agitated. She pointed at her nose and scolded, “Misunderstanding? You and Fan Cheng had an affair before I joined the family, and after I married him, you were still unhappy. Otherwise, why would you be fine being a mistress of a married man, I see that you’re dead set on being the main madam of my Fan family!”

He Yan had a headache.

That lady was truly unreasonable. Even though she looked like a flowery and slender woman, she had a vulgar way of talking. “Madam, you must inquire thoroughly. I knew Mr Fan before but I haven’t looked for him since the marriage.”

“You’re lying. If you hadn’t approached him, how could he give you something?”

“I’m also very troubled about this. If Madam could persuade Mr Fan not to do something like this, it would be appreciated.”

Tang Ying stumbled a few steps back and fell into a chair. Two lines of tears slid down her face, “Bastard… What a bastard!”

He Yan looked at her sympathetically. Any fool could see that Fan Cheng was not a good match for her. Even if he stopped looking for He Yan, he would find some other woman in the future. He Yan didn’t look up to him, but a few people would be willing to sacrifice themselves to climb to a higher branch. The eldest daughter of Cheng Wu Lang was more than enough for Fan Cheng. It was a pity that even with her beauty and such good background she was still tied up with Fan Cheng for the rest of her life.

Tang Ying’s maids and nanny quickly approached to comfort Tang Ying in a low voice. After a while, Tang Ying dried her tears.

She said, “You little bitch, you are used to lying. How could I believe your nonsense even for a moment?”

“What exactly does Madam want?” He Yan looked at the sky. “It’s getting late, I should go back.”

The woman who was consoling Tang Ying said, “Go back? You’ve done such shameless things and you still want to go back. Until our Lady has a good idea of what to do with you, you have to stay here!”

He Yan retorted, “You dare to imprison me privately?”

The old woman looked at He Yan with disdain and said, “Those who come out of small doors are not sensible. How can this be regarded as imprisonment? Since you are our young master’s favourite, you’re half Fan. Isn’t it appropriate for our lady, as a Madam of the house, to teach a servant a lesson? Even if you sue us, our actions are justified!”

He Yan was angry but she laughed. How could someone spew so much nonsense with such a serious face?

Seeing He Yan laugh, Tang Ying, who was originally a bit hesitant, became angry. “Tie her up and throw her in the backroom, starve her for a night. We’ll see tomorrow whether she’s still so arrogant!”

In the end, she was just a lady from a big family, who had recently married into her husband’s family. She hadn’t had the time to learn those thunderous and ruthless tactics, to vent out her anger. It was just a matter of tying people up and starving them so that they would be scared. He Yan was not afraid of it, but she was just scared of causing trouble for the He family as she was the eldest child of the family.

The women rushed and bundled her up like a chicken. He Yan stayed still during the entire and obediently let them tie her. Tang Ying looked at He Yan with a heart full of frustration.

When they finished tying her up, they threw He Yan on the bed of the backroom. The maid asked, “Madam, do you want to leave someone here to keep watch…”

“Leave what?” Tang Ying said angrily, “Let her stay here alone until it gets dark and see if she’s afraid. If she is robbed by a passing thief,” she smiled viciously. “I’ll see if Fan Cheng would still want her!”

The group of people walked away mightily, bringing the courtyard to a standstill.

He Yan lay flat on the floor with her hands tied to her feet, looking quietly at the bed.

Needless to say, the bed was very soft, and the curtains were made of delicate soft gauze. It seemed that Madam Fan was quite kind to her prisoner. She sighed. The house that Mrs Fan settled her in casually was even more beautiful than the house carefully built by He Sui.

‘The house is still empty all day, isn’t it a waste?’ She thought indecisively. After the time taken to brew a cup of tea had passed, ensuring that there was no more movement outside, she tampered with the rope.

The hands were tied, which felt a little uncomfortable, but the method of binding was random; similar to bundling up like a dumpling. She tried to reach out and touch the knot. Being in the barracks for ten days, she had learned how to unbuckle the knot. Such unorganized knots were the simplest.

He Yan felt the shape of the knot and was certain that it could be solved, so she stretched out her hands to do just that. As she was about to move, she heard the sound of footsteps outside. The sound was very low but with her sharp hearing, she recognized a male’s voice. She stopped her movements and tilted her head to look outside the door.

Was Tang Ying telling the truth about her being a flower here?

The sound of footsteps became more prominent as the person approached step by step. He Yan became a little nervous. She fiddled inside her sleeve for a long time and finally found a sharpened, pointed bamboo branch.

It was too expensive to go to the weapon shop and build a hidden weapon. And she was too frugal and poor to have that much money. In such desperate situations, all she could do was to pick up a bamboo branch and sharpen it herself. He Yan pitied herself thinking about it.

The door was pushed open and a man dressed as a guard walked in.

He was shocked when he saw He Yan with her eyes open and her mouth blocked by a piece of cloth, but he kept looking at her quietly. After a while, he walked towards and whispered in her ear, “Miss He Yan, don’t be afraid. Master asked me to help you.”

It turned out that he was not there to pick flowers but save lives.

The guard removed the cloth from her mouth and carried her on his shoulder. “This slave will send you out first.”

He Yan was so unaccustomed to this posture that she felt as if she had become someone else’s captive and was about to be dragged out to be beheaded by the enemy.

But if other people had a good heart, it was hard to say anything.

The guard took He Yan into a carriage, which quickly left the Fan’s house. He Yan didn’t utter a word which perplexed the guard a little.

He thought he would hear her screaming and crying when he went in. After all, Miss He was a timid and weak woman. Even though she was gagged, she looked curious and guarded but there was no fear in her eyes.

The guard had not seen such a woman. He inexplicably felt some shiver in his heart. Fortunately, the carriage was agile, and in about an incense stick of time, they arrived at the destination.

The guard helped He Yan out of the carriage.

The sky was already completely dark.

The Chun Lai River at night, without the hustle-bustle of the day, had become quiet and still. On such a night, there should have been many floating boats in the river with people singing, dancing, drinking and merrymaking. But that day, due to the heavy rain, the wind was cold. Only a few boats were floating in the river. A few fire lanterns could be seen, looking very lonely.

He Yan raised her head and the rain fell on her face, cold and itchy. She looked at the distance, “Why did you bring me here?”

The guard didn’t dare look at her face. He clenched his fists and said, “The young master is waiting for you on the boat ahead. This slave will take you there.”

# Chapter 25: ENTANGLED

The little boat was swaying with the wind, and the moon was hidden behind the clouds. There were only a few, scattered stars that could be seen in the dark sky. The lights near the river bank shone onto the surface of the water, and so He Yan could vaguely see her own reflection.

The guard rowed the little boat towards the ornately decorated ship in the center of the river.

He Yan hung her head and was silent. The guard couldn’t help but turn his head to look back at He Yan, and saw the girl sitting at the stern of the boat, upright, still, with both her hands tied with rope. She raised her head ever so slightly and stared at him, as if she was aware that he was looking at her. The guard shuddered, the oar clutched in his hand almost falling into the river.

Her cold stare stupefied him.

He couldn’t describe that eerie feeling. It was like a dead person was watching him. Combined with the sound of the wind-driven waves, she was like a ghost.

The whole ordeal was strange, and the guard was worried. She didn’t talk, and didn’t ask for anything. Any other woman would ask at least one or two questions, but He Yan didn’t. She was as quiet as a doll, as quiet as a dead person would be. It was completely silent.

The water seemed to glisten underneath the colors of the night sky. It acted like a whirlpool, bringing back the memories she had tried to forget, like the time Wan Ru had dragged her by the hair and drowned her in the pond.

She was once adept at swimming, but now, her entire body was tense and rigid, as if telling her she was terrified of water.

She was afraid of falling into the water below, afraid of being sucked into an endless whirlpool, and afraid that she wouldn’t be able to make it back to the surface. She was afraid that the light would move farther and farther away from her, until it was completely dark. She was afraid that her life would come to an abrupt end, and she couldn’t do anything about it.

She felt disgusted by her own cowardice and fear, but she couldn’t think of any other way. She could only sit silently in that small boat and allow herself to be rowed towards the ship.

The ship must have been owned by someone wealthy. It was slightly smaller than a cargo ship, but larger than a fisherman’s boat. The guard helped He Yan up into the boat, lifted the curtain, and escorted her in.

He then proceeded to leave in the small boat, as if he was ordered by others to not approach the ship.

He Yan stared at the person in front of him.

Fan Cheng was dressed well today, with clothing that was extravagant and expensive. Inside the cabin, an aromatic incense had been lit and there were softly-lit lanterns. Upon entering, the first thing He Yan noticed was the beautiful fragrance.

He Yan struggled to escape the whirlpool of memories that were spinning around in her brain as she faced Fan Cheng and said, “Fan Gong Zi.”

Fan Cheng walked towards, pulled a chair out from underneath a table, and made her sit on it.

“Ah He, you were wronged.”

He Yan was silent.

“I didn’t expect that woman to be so vicious towards you, going as far as to abduct you and tie you up. If I didn’t have somebody secretly protecting you, the consequences would have been unimaginable. Ah He, do you understand my pain now?” Fan Cheng lamented.

He Yan looked at the rope tied around her feet, shook her head, and replied, “I don’t understand.”

Fan Cheng’s guards had forced her into a carriage, rowed her in a boat, and then onto the ship where she was now. Not once did they untie the rope binding her hands.

Her wrists had ached as they chafed against the thick rope, but she hadn’t said a thing.

Fan Cheng stared into her eyes and tried to explain. “I was afraid you’d misunderstand me and refuse to board the ship, so I didn’t unbind the rope.”

However, even after saying this, he still didn’t do anything about the rope.

“I’m on a boat.” He Yan said whilst laughing. “Where could I possibly run to? It wouldn’t do any harm to untie me.”

Her smile was as radiant as the morning sun, unspeakably bright. Fan Cheng was stunned. He Yan wasn’t a very obedient child, so he didn’t think He Yan had grown up to be so bold and courageous.

The more he thought about it, the more he itched to reach out and stroke her face. He smiled slightly, kneeled in front of He Yan, looked her in the eyes and said, “Ah He, I’m not trying to keep you captive. You just need to understand your current situation.”

“My wife is known to be jealous. She will never let you go. Even If you decide to return today, she’ll try to find you tomorrow. Your father’s just a drill field officer, while my father-in-law is the right hand of the emperor. There are plenty of places where things could go terribly wrong if you decide to leave. In the end, nothing matters if you aren’t safe.”

“Your house is unprotected, with barely any maidservants and no guards. Once she catches you, she’ll torture you with her twisted ways. I-I won’t be able to bear it.”

Fan Cheng looked at her affectionately. “How could I stand to watch you suffer?”

“Oh?” He Yan exclaimed as she started to secretly unbind the rope. She quietly asked, “What are you planning to do?”

Fan Cheng was overjoyed at seeing her finally relax. “I’m going to hide you somewhere safe so my wife won’t be able to find you. There’ll be servants and guards waiting on you everyday. When the time comes, I’ll bring you back. Once you’re the mistress of the Fan family, nobody would dare to take advantage of you.”

“Mistress?” He Yan asked.

“Yes.” Fan Cheng said assertively as he placed a hand over his heart. “Ah He, you have been and will be the only one in my heart. I promise. If this marriage hadn’t been arranged long ago, I would’ve never married her! You need not worry, I’ll only love one person in this life – and that is you. You just need to wait…”

He Yan chuckled after hearing this.

Fan Cheng was taken aback.

“Aren’t you just trying to make me your outside mistress?” He Yan said softly.

It was true that if the He family’s eldest daughter was here, she would’ve been moved to tears by this oath. However, she wasn’t. It was clear. If a man wanted to cheat on a woman, he would be able to tell all sorts of lies. Why would Fan Cheng ever want to marry her?

If she hadn’t experienced the same thing with Xu Zhi Heng, she might’ve been tricked. Fan Cheng had looked at her the same way he did, as if she was pathetic and ridiculous.

“Ah He, you…” Fan Cheng frowned.

“Fan Gong Zi, I’ve already made it quite clear. Since you’re already married, I’m going to let go of our past and go separate ways. I have no intention in being entangled with you, and I’m hoping that you’ll stop bothering me.”

The knot on the rope had been loosened.

Fan Cheng didn’t see the rope fall to the ground, so he looked at her with a puzzled expression. After a moment of silence, he suddenly sneered. “He Yan, you must be joking. I’m coaxing you kindly, and yet you’re so rude! Entanglement? There are so many women in this world. Why would I continue pestering you? It’s just a pity that the time I spent with you was utterly wasted!”

“Does Fan *gong-zi* want me to repay the time I’ve wasted with silver or gold?”

He Yan found it ridiculous.

“I don’t lack money. Why don’t you give yourself to me instead?” He smirked. “If you serve me well, I may even pay you.”

Before He Yan could reply, a furious voice was suddenly heard. “What bullsh\*t did you put in this?”

He Yan turned around to see the curtain lifted and a dripping-wet man walk in. It was He Yun Sheng.

# Chapter 26: ACCIDENTAL HIT

“Yun Sheng?” He Yan almost thought she was dreaming. She looked again and found that it was indeed He Yun Sheng.

He Yun Sheng had already walked up to her, and after shielding her, he pushed Fan Cheng far away.

“You…how did you get up here?!” Fan Cheng stood still and pointed at him, his eyes were full of surprise.

“Swam up, of course.” He Yun Sheng roared.

As soon as he got up from the water, his whole body was dripping wet. He squatted down to relieve the rope on He Yan’s feet.

“How did you know I was here?”

“I was afraid that Fan Cheng would pester you, so I sent Shuang Qing back to guard the place earlier, but who knew that he would just see you being called away.” Shuang Qing was the boy He Yan had bought for He Yun Sheng, who accompanied him to the academy on weekdays.

“Shuang Qing followed you here and kept me informed about the situation. So I ran all the way and swam here. Fortunately, I caught up.” He untied the rope binding He Yan’s feet and was about to untie the rope around He Yan’s hand but it was already loose. It was a little strange but he didn’t think much about it. He straightened and glared at Fan Cheng, “If I hadn’t made it in time, what would this beast have done to you?”

“Do what?” Fan Cheng finally came back to his senses. He looked at He Yun Sheng and said with a fearless smile, “Do you think you can change anything by coming here?”

There was no one on the boat except the three of them. They were probably afraid of disturbing Fan Cheng’s “mood”. Even the guard who had just sent He Yan to the boat was nowhere to be found. He estimated that the guard might be rowing a small boat and was far away, waiting for Fan Cheng’s orders, after the deed was done.

“Your sister will be mine sooner or later.” Fan Cheng said with disdain. “You poured the wine first. Why should I be ashamed of drinking the wine which was served on my table? Who tried to climb my bed at first? Now you are pretending to be chaste!”

“You!” When He Yun Sheng heard the words, he turned pale with rage. He rushed forward and punched him, “You bastard!”

Fan Cheng almost fell when he was attacked. The boat shook violently by his action, making He Yun Sheng stagger.

He Yan frowned and was about to go to help but she saw something glinting in Fan Cheng’s sleeve. She could vaguely see a silver light and her scalp tightened. She yelled, “Yun Sheng, dodge!”

He Yun Sheng did not know what had happened, but subconsciously turned over. Fan Cheng took out a knife and pierced his clothes. Luckily, He Yun Sheng missed by inches.

He Yun Sheng broke out in cold sweat, “How dare you!”

“Why not?” Fan Cheng’s face was ferocious. “It doesn’t matter if the son of a school lieutenant dies. When you die, I will enslave your sister for my entertainment, every day, and sell her to a brothel after I get tired of her.” He started laughing maniacally.

He Yan’s eyes flashed with a trace of fierceness.

Afraid of causing trouble to the He family, she did not want to fight Fan Cheng. But it seemed that Fan Cheng was not willing to give up; whether she made the move or not did not matter any more.

He Yun Sheng was so angry that he simply turned his head and bumped into Fan Cheng’s stomach. Fan Cheng was knocked down unexpectedly, and the boat wavered again as he fell to the ground. He was about to shout but before he could open his mouth He Yan warned, “Don’t let him make a sound!” Immediately they rushed forward, stuffed the veil on the table into Fan Cheng’s mouth.

Fan Cheng was silenced. It was at that moment that He Yun Sheng swiftly rode on his back and started punching him. He was a teenager with great strength. Although Fan Cheng’s mouth was fierce, he could not be He Yun Sheng’s opponent. He gradually stopped struggling.

“Yun Sheng, that’s enough.” He Yan stopped him. “If you hit any more, he will die.”

“I wish he was dead!” He Yun Sheng gritted his teeth. “If he died, he wouldn’t dare to make trouble!”

“But the He family would be in trouble.” He Yan pulled away He Yun Sheng’s hand. “Get him up first.”

He Yun Sheng stood up leaving Fan Cheng motionless, facing the ground. He Yun Sheng stretched out his foot and kicked him, “Get up, don’t play dead!”

Fan Cheng still showed no movement.

“I hit you twice and now you’re pretending to be dead. You are expert in how to blackmail people.” While mocking Fan Cheng, He Yun Sheng tried to kick him up. As he moved, he suddenly saw that the place where Fan Cheng was lying was gradually filled with a mass of red.

“He, he…” He Yun Sheng stuttered.

He Yan was listening carefully to the movement outside. The boat was swaying. She wondered if Fan Cheng’s guards noticed it. There seemed to be nothing wrong at the moment. Maybe they thought it was due to Fan Cheng’s “mood”. At that moment, she heard He Yun Sheng’s sudden change in voice. He was looking at Fang Cheng strangely.

A moment later, she squatted down and calmly turned Fan Cheng over.

“Ah~” He Yun Sheng gave a short cry but quickly covered his mouth and swallowed the rest of his words. He looked at the sight in disbelief.

Fan Cheng was lying on his back. His body was soft; as if he had no bones. The clothes at his waist and abdomen had been dyed red with blood. A small part of the hilt was exposed while the blade of the knife was lost somewhere between his flesh and bones.

During his fight with He Yun Sheng, Fan Cheng had pulled a short knife out of his sleeve. Later, the boat swayed and the knife fell to the ground. When He Yun Sheng had punched him again, he lost his balance. As he fell, the sharp knife pierced into his abdomen.

It would not have entered so deep but He Yun Sheng also pressed him to the ground and punched him with his fist. This practically led the whole knife to penetrate further into his abdomen, causing his death.

He Yun Sheng was frightened to the point that his legs became weak and he fell. He was horrified, “He…he won’t be…”

He Yan stretched out two fingers to probe Fan Cheng’s nose, and uttered a single word, “Dead.”

He Yun Sheng looked at her blankly as if he didn’t comprehend what she said. A moment later, he started sobbing, “He…how did he die? What shall we do? “

The boat was still in the river, swaying and floating, and there seemed to be no other light around except for the lights inside the boat. In the dead silence, He Yun Sheng’s sniffles were particularly distinct.

He kept on murmuring, “What should we do? What are we going to do?”

He was just a teenager who had never seen blood, let alone kill a person. He even had to make a detour to kill a fish. He was only fierce in his words but he never expected that he would kill someone one day. He Yun Sheng was panicking.

Looking at Fan Cheng’s body, He Yan frowned.

She had killed too many people but they were all enemies met on the battlefield. She had not been in a situation like this. Though she was a little surprised, she was not agitated at all. He Yun Sheng was in a trance, crying and laughing at the same time. He was shaking Fan Cheng’s corpse as if trying to shake him awake. He seemed to have lost his mind.

Smack!

He Yun Sheng felt a burning pain on his face like that of being slapped. He woke up from his chaotic thoughts and looked at He Yan who was in front of him.

He suddenly discerned that compared to him, He Yan was extremely calm. Her gaze was as sharp as a sword, piercing his heart. It made him shiver. Her hands were steady, unlike his, which were still shaking.

Her voice was cold, laced with a tinge of hatred and harshness. “He Yun Sheng, wake up, he’s already dead.”

# Chapter 27: DISTRACTING ATTENTION

He was already dead. He Yun Sheng stared at He Yan blankly.

Fan Cheng’s wound was still bleeding, and the knife was impartial as it stabbed him right in the stomach. He Yun Sheng felt his throat was dry. After a moment, he finally opened his mouth. His voice shook with a determination to face death.

He said, “I’m going to the court to turn myself in as I’m the one who killed the man.”

He stood up as if to move forward, but only after he took two steps, He Yan pulled him back. He staggered and almost fell down.

He Yan asked, “What crime are you going to pay for?”

“He’s dead. I’ll pay for his death.” He Yunsheng choked, “It’s justified.”

“It’s not a price worth paying for such a man.” He Yan glanced at Fan Cheng on the ground. “I was thinking that even after today, Fan Cheng would not give up. Eventually, He family would get in trouble, but now there will be less trouble. He is dead – at least He family will be a lot more peaceful in the future. ”

“Do you still remember what he said at that time?”

He Yun Sheng remembered that when Fan Cheng wanted to kill him at that time he said, “After you die, I will enslave your sister and will use her for my entertainment every day. When I get tired of her, I will sell her to the brothel.” He Yu Sheng took such words for granted.

“You should know that Fan Cheng would have killed you and me on this ship today without having to pay the price. Why should you throw away your life if you killed him by mistake? Are our lives rubbish and only his is precious? Why? With what right?”

He Yun Sheng was still young and passionate, but paying for the life of a man like Fan Cheng unworthy.

“I don’t want to, either.” He Yun Sheng said, his eyes filled with grief and indignation. “But there isn’t any other place for us to go now.”

He Yun Sheng’s thoughts were simple – because he killed Fan Cheng, the Fan family would probably come to their door, and if he surrendered and paid for Fan Cheng’s life with his life, it would all be over. But He Yan knew that this was impossible. She came from a prominent family in her previous life. Naturally, she knew that people like the Fan family would not give up even if He Yun Sheng surrendered his life. He Sui and her, including Qingmei and Shuang Qing –  none of them would be spared.

“Come here.” He Yan patted him on the shoulder. He Yun Sheng looked at her in confusion.

“You just said you swam here, that means you are good at swimming? Can you hold your breath? ” He Yan asked.

He Yunsheng nodded, “Yes.”

“You change into my clothes, and when you hear my message later, jump off the boat, swim downstream, then change into clean clothes and sneak back home, be sure to be quick, okay?”

He Yun Sheng nodded foolishly, shook his head, and looked at He Yan, “What about you?”

He Yan picked up the bundle from the ground, and in the bundle, there were new clothes she had picked up today for He Yun Sheng from the tailor’s shop. She said, “I’ll change my clothes and draw Fan Cheng’s guards away.”

He Yunsheng was startled and blurted out, “No!

“How would you distract them? You are a woman. If they catch you, they will torture you and then kill you. You don’t even have the strength to tie a chicken. If you fall in their hands, your life will be living hell… “

He still babbled, but He Yan pressed his shoulders.

She retorted, “No, I can get rid of them.”

Under the dim light of the lamp, He Yan’s eyes were clear and determined. She even smiled. The smile was very relaxing and somehow soothed He Yun Sheng’s panicked mood, but also made him want to cry.

“I can’t let you go.” He Yun Sheng muttered.

“Listen, Yun Sheng, you jump off the boat in my clothes. I’ll lure them away. We won’t be able to see each other these two days. I can’t go back to the He house as I don’t want to be discovered. In another five days, you go to a tavern called Liu Quan Ju which is in the city’s west. There would be a row of willow trees at the door of the tavern. After finding them, search for the third willow tree from the left and dig down three inches. I will leave a letter for you there. We’ll meet again then, okay? “

He Yun Sheng shook his head, “I can’t let you go…”

“You’re not a child anymore, you are a man, and you will have to shoulder the heavy burden of the He family in the future. You have to calm down and do as I say. I will be alright, as always,” He Yan replied.

He Yun Sheng was speechless and couldn’t utter a word after he listened to He Yan’s reply.

It was indeed true, whether it was Wang Jiu Gui, whether it was gambling at the casino, or whether it was a horse race at the academy’s field, every time she was unexpectedly fine, but this time it was different, this time it was the matter of a human life.

“On the father’s side, explain it for me.” He Yan said, “After a while, Fan Cheng’s guards will come over, so we don’t have much time. Now hurry up and change.” She said, “Turn your back, I’ll give you my coat first.”

The boat floated quietly in the river, and when He Yun Sheng and He Yan stood opposite to each other again, they changed into their new outfits. He Yan was dressed in brand new men’s clothes, and her hair was tied up into a man’s hair bun. She looked heroic like she really was an elegant young man. He Yun Sheng on the other hand was wearing He Yan’s long skirt and didn’t know where to put his hands and feet. He looked embarrassed.

He Yan chuckled.

“You’re still in the mood to laugh in this dire situation?” He Yun Sheng was so preoccupied and worried that he was not in the mood to quarrel with He Yan.

“It’s not the time to laugh yet.” He Yan picked up a scarf from the ground and covered her face tightly, revealing only a pair of eyes. However, there was also a smile in her eyes, “you have to get used to this.”

Get used to what? Killing people and be on the run as a fugitive? He Yun Sheng felt tired, accompanied by deep worries and fears.

“On the count of three, you jump down, okay?” He Yan said, “Don’t worry about me, we’ll meet again.”

He Yun Sheng was about to go to the bow of the boat.

After taking two steps, he turned back, looked into He Yan’s eyes, and said, “You’ll be fine right? Won’t you?”

He Yan rubbed his head, and the teenager’s hair was cold and fluffy with the droplets he had just brought from the water.

She smiled and answered softly, “Of course.”

# Chapter 28: LATE NIGHT DRIZZLE

The night was so dark that even the raindrops seemed to be black.

The place where the sea and the sky met, in the deep sky, the moon shined brightly, like a ghost from the other side. The sounds of waves slowly dissipated, and the night became exceptionally quiet.

It was at this moment, that a woman’s scream seemed to cut through this silence.

“Kill, kill…”

Gathered in a few small groups, away from the shore, the guards sat together as they waited for Fan *Gong-zi*’s signal. When they first heard those miserable sounds, they were startled.

“What’s going on? It’s been so long, why is she still making trouble?” the head guard asked.

“The young master didn’t send a signal, so let’s just wait.” someone said.

As Fan *Gong-zi*’s guards for so many years, the most important thing for them was to guess what was on their master’s mind. This kind of thing was natural. Fan *Gong-zi* had been the young master of the Fan family for many years. In addition to the woman admiring him on their own, there were a lot of women from good families who had been ruined. Today’s situation, it has happened more than once. After abducting those women on boats or some other outsider’s house, Fan *Gong-zi* would insult them. Those women were poor and had nowhere to complain, so they could only forget it.

Now, He Yan would also be one of them.

Originally, Miss He Yan had a deep affection for Fan *Gong-zi*, and there was no need to resort to such a method. But, who knew that after going off from the door of Fan’s house, she would be so angry, that she really wanted to make a clean break with Fan *Gong-zi*. And he was aroused because of her refusal and resorted to this. But, come to think of it, for people like He Yan only a tough approach works.

What these guards had to do was just to bring He Yan to Fan *Gong-zi*, and what happened afterwards was none of their business.

“I don’t think it is right.” The head guard stood up and looked in the direction of the boat. He saw that Fan *Gong-zi*‘s boat shook violently in the river and it looked like someone had initiated a fight inside.

“No, there is a problem!” he shouted, “Get up! Hurry up. In the past, things never went this far.”

When they heard the head guard, the rest of the people were startled and quickly boarded a small boat to head towards Fan *Gong-zi*‘s boat. As they came closer, they saw a woman who stumbled out and looked panicked. That woman was wearing He Yan’s clothes, seemingly hiding from someone. Then, she jumped down and fell into the river, all the while screaming.

 The river currents quickly swallowed her without any noise, just like a rock fallen in the river – only the sound of water splashing on the surface was heard. There was no more movement.

 “The young master!” the head guard could not help calling out.

No one cared if He Yan lived or died. As the boat came closer to Fan *Gong-zi*’s boat, the head guard climbed on their boat’s bow and landed in Fan *Gong-zi*’s boat. In just a few steps, he entered the inner part of the boat and saw someone who stood there. The person’s back faced him, and his face was covered with a scarf with only his eyes exposed and his features were blurred under the dim light of the moon. At his foot was Fan *Gong-zi*‘s corpse lying in a pool of blood.

That masked man was holding a dagger in his hand.

The guard was so shocked when he saw this scene as he never expected to see such a person in the boat. Looking at Fan *Gong-zi* again, he was afraid that there would be more trouble in the future. A moment later, he regained his senses, furious and angry, and rushed towards the masked man without further thought, “You dare!”

The masked man sneered and started to fight with the guard.

The sound of swords could be heard from the boat, and the boat shook more violently. Soon, the remaining guards also came onto the boat. After the masked man saw the guards that charged over, he no longer wanted to fight and jumped into the river.

 “Catch him!” the head guard shouted, “He killed the young master!”

The guards wanted to follow, but they soon found out that the masked man was very cunning. As all the guards were on Fan Gong Zi’s boat, there was no one in the little boat. They thought that he had dived into the river, but they soon found out that he had got on the little boat that they came from.

This was the center of the river. Although some people could swim in the river, it was night and was difficult to avoid dangers. But the little boat was light and thin and it flowed quickly along the river currents. As their boat was slightly heavier, so, even if they paddled it together, they were still half a step behind the masked man.

One after another, in the drizzle, no one saw another person swimming in the river.

As the boat came near the shore, the masked man threw the wooden paddle in his hands away, stood up and jumped onto the river bank and then quickly disappeared on the shore. The head guard said, “Let two people go to look for the city guards, and the rest follow me to chase after him.”

Although it was the night time, it was not too late. There were hawkers doing business on both the sides of the road. Suddenly a masked man ran from the pier and he looked like he was in a rush. He was followed by a bunch of guards who looked murderous, which frightened the people on the road.

“What’s the matter? Why are they running after him?,” A hawker whose stalk was knocked over didn’t dare to say much, and just stooped down to pick up the scattered fruits on the ground.

“It seems like a murder took place. Look at the person that they are chasing, he doesn’t look like an ordinary person.”

“A pity, it’s not been peaceful these days.”

…

The water by the river shook. Suddenly a hand stretched out of the river. After the hand grabbed on a stone for support, a whole person came out of the water, bringing with him the scent of the water.

He Yu Sheng’s body trembled. He didn’t dare to move carelessly. After he swam for a while, he finally came out. At this moment his face was pale and his lips were purple. He didn’t know if he trembled because the river water was too cold or because he was scared.

He held on to the basket in his hand tightly, inside were his new clothes that He Yan had brought back from the tailor shop and some snacks he had found on the boat. He Yan covered the basket very well, so the clothes inside were clean and not wet. He Yun Sheng took off the woman’s clothes that he was wearing, bundled them up and threw them into the basket. Then, he tied a few stones to the basket and flung the basket to the river.

The river water engulfed the basket in an instant.

He then put on the new spring shirt, which was almost the same colour of his hair. It also happened to hide his wet hair. The clothes were well-fitted and the style was also very beautiful. After he wore his clothes, he realised that his throat was choked up.

However, there was no extra time for him to dilly-dally here. He Yan’s words still rung in his ears.

“You have to change into clean clothes and go home – you must be quick.”

*Must be quick.*

He staggered as he attempted to stand up, but still managed to hurry away in the direction of his home.

There seemed to be a city garrison in the city who searched for someone everywhere. As He Yun Sheng walked, he heard someone talking on the street.

“I heard that someone on a boat in the river has suffered a brutal death.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know, it must be some young master of a big family. Didn’t you see the city guards looking for the culprit everywhere?”

“With so many people, the murderer will definitely not be able to escape. Maybe he is already caught by them. Oops…this rain is heavy and my clothes are also all wet.”

The sound of the talk gradually faded away, until it was no longer heard.

*Hurry up, hurry up.*

A young man in a blue shirt walked along the street. His spring shirt was very thin, and on this rainy day, he probably felt very cold. He tightened the clothes around his body and quickly walked home.

The rain was getting heavier and heavier, and the pedestrians walking on the street without umbrellas, hurried to avoid the rain. The hawkers hid under the eaves and shouted loudly at the pedestrians who passed by and took a look. At a glance, there seemed to be no difference between this night and the last one.

“Sister…” Someone whispered to himself, like the wind of a spring night,  which fell in the drizzle without a trace.

The teenager walked forward with his head lowered, without looking back, as his tears kept falling down.

# Chapter 29: JOINING THE ARMY

“He went in this direction. Chase him!” The leader of the guards pointed to a direction and instructed the approaching unit of guards.

The guards were fully equipped and had numerous horses so they started to chase the person in the direction he pointed to. Fan Cheng’s other guards looked at the leader, and someone asked in a trembling voice, “What should we do if the young master is dead?”

As Fan Cheng’s bodyguard, they failed to protect him well. The Fan family would definitely hold them accountable, and subject them to punishments ranging from light to heavy. If they were mad, they might lose their lives, too.

“Who on earth killed the Young Master?” Someone asked.

“I’ve fought that man, and he has good skills,” the leader clenched his fist, “I’m no match for him.”

“Was he here for the young master? God, who the hell he is?”

Who knows? Fan Cheng had done many evil deeds. Since the man wanted Fan Cheng’s life, he obviously had hated him for a long time. The girls who were abused by Fan Cheng also had parents and brothers. Maybe he took revenge for his relatives or a lover. The man was dead and everything would come to light once the murderer was caught.

“Miss He…,” Someone finally remembered He Yan.

“She’s dead.”

If a person with no strength falls in such a deep and cold river, it would be fatal. So what? No one cared. If He Yan was alive, maybe she would be targeted by the Fan family. It was still better to die. At least the business of the He family would end here.

“If you die, you die.” The leader said nonchalantly, “It’s better to be dead.”

In a word, He Yan’s life was already doomed.

…….

The sound of horses’ hoofs resounded in the depths of the street, and the people in the city were in a panic.

There was a young man, dressed in green, who walked quietly through the shattered temple where the beggars lived in a group and threw his wet old clothes into the abandoned well.

Her clothes had already been changed during the escape, she wore her spring tunics inside so all she had to do was throw off the clothes she wore on the outside. There was no need to wear a turban, so as not to attract attention. She touched the wall and got a layer of dust on her hands. She patted and smeared the black and gray dust and soot on her face. Her face  which was white and clean, immediately turned black, giving her an appearance like… A teenager from an ordinary family who often worked outside.

But she still looked like a handsome teenage boy.

She walked forward without panic, as the city guards behind her arrested people everywhere, but He Yan’s heart was not as calm as it appeared.

Fan Cheng’s guards had fought with her. If they were being careful, they would recognize her. Appearances could be disguised, but size could not be deceived. The guards of the capital city were not trash eaters, and it was not easy to hide from them either. Moreover, if they interrogated the beggars at the temple, they would find out that they had seen a stranger. The gates of this city must have been sealed off by now, and until the next month, the city would be strictly investigated. If they searched people one by one, she would be discovered sooner or later.

It was a headache.

The Fan family was even more prosperous than she had imagined, and they called so many people to chase after her alone. He Yan didn’t want to give up her life in vain.

Units of guards were closing in from every direction, and He Yan was in a precarious position.

Suddenly, she remembered something and stretched out her hand to pull out something from her sleeve.

The paper was crumpled and drenched in the rain.  It was almost impossible to make out the words written on it. This was the conscription notice that He Yun Sheng had torn off the wall that day.

*Conscription document.*

The recruitment office was in an open field outside the stables at the west of the city, where tents were set up, and many people filled out paperwork, underwent a simple inspection, and set off together when the time came. The recruitment of soldiers in Liang Zhou had always been in a rush, and she was sure that it would not be strict because even if the person was underage, it wouldn’t matter. People weren’t willing to go unless their family was extremely poor, otherwise, who does not like to live in peace and prosperity? There was no one who would be willing to suffer for nothing.

But this recruitment notice came exactly at the right time.

Now that she had become a wanted criminal, staying in the capital would do no good to her, and if she was found out, it would be even worse if the He Family got implicated because of her. Besides, it was of no use to stay in the capital. The He family was too far away from her, and the Xu family was even more of a high gate that she couldn’t reach, so she had to stand at the same level as them to claim what she wanted.

It was better to go to the barracks. She could go out of the city with the recruited team. At least there would be a place where she could stay.

There were no other options, and she had her own arrangements too. She was thinking about how to find a reasonable reason to explain to the He family about her departure, but now she didn’t have to think of any other reason, because this was the only way left for her. The draft would close tomorrow and it was the night before the deadline, so she was right on time.

He Yan smiled and felt relaxed so she no longer hesitated and walked towards the direction of the west barracks.

The west barrack was originally a horse farm, but horses had been evacuated since the draft tent was set up there. In front of the long tent, a red-faced man sat with a long knife at his waist. Because of the rain, he was wearing a felt hat on his head, and his eyes were like copper bells. He looked neither grumpy nor pretentious and dozed off without a hitch.

Since recruitment was almost over, as soon as the next day passed, the new recruits would go to Liang Zhou with them. At this time, those who were willing to go would have already come to cast their names, and there should be no new recruits at this time.

When He Yan walked forward, the big man didn’t even lift his eyelids, so He Yan had no choice but to say, “This big brother, is recruitment over?”

The big man sized her up and said slowly, “No.”

“That’s good.” He Yan smiled with delight and said, “I want to join the army.”

“You?” The red-faced man gave a sarcastic smile and said, “Brother, how old are you this year?”

“Sixteen.”

“Sixteen,” the man pondered for a while and said, “You don’t look like sixteen with this body. You haven’t done any heavy work at home on weekdays, right? Joining the army is no joke, if you’re making a joke, go back before it’s too late, don’t waste my time.”

“Big Brother, I really want to join the army.” He Yan thought about the brothers who came out of the barracks and imitated their mournful expression. “There is no one at home. I can’t live. If I don’t join the army, I would have to sell myself as a servant. It would be better to go to war, either die on the battlefield or do some meritorious service. I could live differently. Besides, Big Brother,” she leaned closer and whispered,  “I’m afraid there are not enough men, so it’s better to have one more than one less, so we could make up a whole number.”

The big man was moved by what she said. He just wanted to get people together and finish his work as soon as possible so he said, “All right, if you want to die, I won’t stop you. The barracks are just right in front of you, it’s not a place for pleasure, and if you can’t make it and want to be a deserter, you’ll be punished by military laws.”

“I won’t be a deserter.” He Yan vowed.

The red-faced man sneered. He had seen many such teenagers, and they were all confident when they came but when the time came to battle, they were the ones who peed their pants in fear.

“Then you fill out this form.” He handed the paper to He Yan.

Meanwhile, on the outskirts of the barracks in the city’s west, the garrison of the guards turned their horses around when they reached there as in front of them was the tent for recruitment in Liang Zhou and there was no need to rush in there.

He Yan wrote two words sloppily. This time, she used her own name.

He Yan.

# Chapter 30: UNDRESSING

*Translation and edits: Dot.*

He Yan had filled in the conscription paperwork quickly and with neat handwriting. The red-faced man glanced at it and asked, “You can read?”

“Only a little,” He Yan answered modestly.

The majority of the men enlisting in the army were young and hard-working, but few were literate. The red-faced man’s expression seemed to soften a little as he said, “Head over to the tent in the back. They’ll administer you a simple examination. Upon passing, sign the document, and you’ll be officially registered.”

He Yan expressed her gratitude and left.

The tent was located near the racecourse, standing out amongst the others for its sheer size and grandeur. He Yan lifted the curtain, only to see a shirtless man sitting atop a horse and a physician standing nearby. The shirtless man grinned and asked the other, “Come on, aren’t I so buff?”

He Yan pretended to not see him. However, the self-proclaimed buff man had caught sight of her. With a surprised expression on his face, he scoffed, “Are people this frail and weak even allowed to enlist in the army?”

The physician then urged him to leave, saying “Throw on your clothing and get out. I don’t have all day.”

The stout man cursed under his breath as he left, occasionally stopping to glance back at He Yan with a puzzled expression.

“Stand here…” The physician interrupted, “And undress yourself.”

He Yan didn’t reply.

He Yan knew beforehand that enlisting in the army meant undergoing a physical examination to confirm she wasn’t crippled or bore an infectious disease. If she hadn’t known that, her secret might’ve been revealed. However, she was prepared, after undergoing a similar experience when joining the Yue army in his past life.

He Yan took the physician’s hand in her own, and deposited a single silver coin.

He looked down at the coin and then back up at her, frowning. “This…”

“Physician, I had no intention of hiding this from you, but I contracted a disease when I was younger.” He Yan looked down, ashamed. “Because of the defects that remain, I was never welcome and was bullied my entire life. I couldn’t stand it, so I decided to enlist in the army. I’m begging you, please help me. If I die on the battlefield, I’ll surely remember your kindness and repay you in my next life.”

The physician had expected him to blabber on about some contagious disease, but didn’t expect it to be some type of defect. He stared at He Yan with pity and sympathy. It was the first time he had encountered such a situation, and with such a handsome young man.

After weighing the silver coin in his hand and squeezing it several times, he looked back up at He Yan. He Yan looked perfectly healthy, with no sign of a disease. “In that case, you can leave. Pay attention to your surroundings, and don’t let it be seen by others. If you’re found out, don’t blame it on me.”

“Thank you!” He Yan replied whilst shedding a few tears out of graciosity for the physician.

He Yan let out a sigh of relief, after seeing how smoothly the examination went. She stepped outside onto the grass, and was met with the same stout man from before, stuffing his mouth with biscuits. When he saw He Yan standing there, staring at the food, he beckoned her over as if to say hello.

He Yan thought about it for a moment, but ultimately decided to walk over to him.

“Little brother, I saw you in there just now.” The stout man paused and attempted to wipe off the sesame seeds that were around his mouth, but failed. “Are you here to enlist in the army?”

He Yan nodded while staring at the remaining biscuits in his hand, feeling the hunger start to set in. She hadn’t eaten anything this entire afternoon, and she could hear her stomach begin to rumble.

“Are you hungry?” The stout man asked, seeing her stare at the food in his hand. “Here, take this! I’ve already eaten five, so I’m full.”

He Yan was famished, so she decided to accept the offer. She stepped closer to the stout man, took the biscuit from his hand, and began to eat.

“You look so thin and frail, and yet you’re still enlisting in the army? How could your family be at ease?” The man muttered under his breath, “Even my 10-year old brother looks stronger than you.”

He Yan gulped down the biscuits and replied, “Appearances can be deceiving. I may look weak, but in actuality, I’m strong. I’ll be sixteen this year.”

“How did you come to join the army?” The stout man asked curiously, “You look like you have an education.”

He Yan replied straightforwardly, “My family’s been in decline, and there’s no way out.”

The stout man understood He Yan. With sympathy, he remarked, “Little brother, things will change for the better, so you need not pay attention to it. If you follow me, I will be sure to protect you.”

“Thank you, big brother.”

After hearing the words, “big brother,” he was pleased. “My surname is Hong, my full name being Hong Shan. Just call me Brother Shan. What’s your name, little brother?”

“My surname is He, He Yan. The He as in firewood.”

“He? That’s one rare surname. I’ll call you Ah He from now on.”

“Okay!” He Yan nodded. She had finished eating the biscuits, and after wiping her mouth, she ventured out to look for a stable. Upon finding one, she plopped down against the railing, content.

Hong Shan watched her, perplexed, and asked, “Ah He, are you not heading home?”

“I’m not heading back.” He Yan replied, whilst propping her head up with her hands. “I’m staying here.”

The sympathy in Hong Shan’s eyes became even more evident. He sat down next to He Yan and said, “I’m staying here as well. Let’s make do tonight, and set off tomorrow.”

“It couldn’t get better than this.”

In the distance, a torch was ignited outside the camp. It flickered violently underneath the rain, as if it was going to be extinguished the next moment. They sat quietly in the darkness together, with a lot on their mind.

He Yan didn’t know how He Yun Sheng was doing, if he got home safely, or if he was stranded. He Yan worried about it, until she unconsciously fell asleep.

–

Countless unpleasant things happen in Jing Cheng everyday, and yet nobody pays any attention to the affairs of the poor. However, if something happened to a high-ranking family, it would be known to all.

Last night, there was a homicide case on the river. The young master of the Fan family was brutally murdered in a boat. The assailant escaped, leaving no trace or evidence. At the same time, the daughter of a drill officer was also aboard the ship. She was murdered as well, being thrown in the river without a corpse remaining.

The murderer hadn’t been caught, leaving the citizens living in the city in chaos and panic for quite a while. However, many citizens applauded the deed, as the young master of the Fan family was known for ruining and abusing girls from common families. He abused his family’s power, causing the girls to shy away from making a public statement. Perhaps, the heavens have finally enforced justice upon the guilty.

The He family was miserable.

He Sui seemed to age 10 years overnight, sitting still in the hall everyday like a clay sculpture. Qing Mei hid in the yard, and Shuang Qing wore a bitter expression every day. Qing Mei had wiped her tears and lamented, “How could she suddenly disappear…”

He Yun Sheng had spent all his time sitting in the stables next to Xiang Xiang.

The hay bales had started to spoil, but He Yun Sheng paid no attention to it. The horse was also fidgety, but He Yun Sheng was not affected by it at all.

The lack of news on He Yan was better than unfortunate news. He Yan hadn’t been caught. He thought of the ship, where the night rain and sweet smelling-fragrance covered up the scent of blood.

He had been afraid and helpless. Every time, the girl in the beautiful, long dress with the dreamy eyes would pat him on the head and say, “It’ll be alright. Like always, I’ll be fine.”

“This time, I hope – no, I’m sure she’s alright.”

# Chapter 31: THE XIAO FAMILY PRINCE

Spring came to an end, even the rain took on the summer’s heat.

At the end of the last day of the conscription, the long tents for filling out paperwork in the barracks have been put away and replaced by numerous small tents. The new recruits who had bid farewell to their families had already assembled, waited for the night to pass, and set off for Liangzhou early the next morning.

The tents were so small that a few people could barely squeeze into them. He Yan and Hong Shan were sitting next to each other.  Since neither of them had much luggage, it was quite spacious to sit up. From last night to tonight, He Yan was here for an entire day.

There would be steamed buns to eat here, two for a meal, and they could get more after they settled down in Liang Zhou. The rest was not much of a problem, but it was inconvenient to go to the toilet, so He Yan would have to wait until late at night when no one goes there.

She just got out of the toilet, walked to her tent, and when she lifted the tent, there were two people inside. Hong Shan talked to them. As they heard movement outside, the two men looked back.

They were probably a pair of brothers, somewhat similar in appearance, thin, and looked very handsome. They looked rather young. The older one looked about sixteen or seventeen years old, and the younger one looked almost as old as He Yun Sheng. He Yan made a guess that the older looking one must be the older brother and the smaller one who looked as young as Yun Sheng must be the smaller brother.

The younger one when he saw He Yan showed a smile and asked with a familiar tone, “This brother is…”

“This is your brother Ah He,” Hong Shan helped He Yan, and said to He Yan, “These are the two new brothers today, there are no more accommodations out there, so they are here to squeeze in with us.” He pointed to the young man who was quiet, “this is Shi” and then he pointed to the other young man who had a simple and innocent smile, “This is Mak.”

Shi and Mak were probably a pair of brothers from a poor family, otherwise a better family would have given their children a better name.

He Yan found a place to sit down. As there were over two people, the tent suddenly appeared to be a little crowded.

 “Are you guys from the capital?” After she asked, He Yan felt a little thirsty, so she unscrewed the water bottle at her waist and took a sip.

Shi was not talkative, but his younger brother, Mak, was very lively. He said, “We lived on Xiang Huai mountain. We usually lived by hunting. When we went down the mountain last time, I saw a recruitment draft, so I discussed it with my brother and came to join the army.”

They used to be a hunter’s family on the mountain.

“Perhaps your parents have also come to join the army?” Hong Shan asked. Generally speaking, even if the family is poor and came to join the army, they won’t let their two sons come and join together – they would always leave a way out for the family.

“Our parents are long gone. I grew up with my brother.”

Hong Shan sighed, “Then you should all the more cherish your lives, it’s no fun to come and join the army. You guys aren’t…” he glanced at He Yan’s direction, “Do you guys also want to do meritorious service like him, right?”

“A man should make a great contribution,” said Mak naively. “What’s more, the commander of the right army, Commander Xiao, is going to command the troops leading to Liang Zhou. My brother and I have admired him for a long time. It’s our honor to work with him!”

He Yan was listening to them as she drank water, and with a “puff” water gushed out of her mouth and she almost choked herself when she heard their words.

“Who did you say went to Liang Zhou to be the commander?” She asked.

Mak thought she didn’t know “Governor Xiao” and so he deliberately explained, “It’s the present-day General Feng Yun, the Xiao family’s second son, Xiao Huaijin.”

He Yan’s heart trembled.

How could Xiao Jue be a commander in Liang zhou? There was no need for him to be in this position. Besides, he had his own army. Why should he take new soldiers to Liang Zhou… unless he was demoted.

Xiao Jue was demoted?

……

**The Xiao family in Beijing.**

Xiao’s house was specially renovated according to his wife’s preference when General Xiao was alive. The Xiao family did not touch the layout of the courtyard in later generations, so although it was a generals’ family, the courtyard was as elegant and chic as a normal courtyard which could be seen in the city of Suzhou.

Through the flower wall was the main room, next to the main room was a pomegranate tree (the time hadn’t come for it to bear fruits), through the window, you could see a yellow pine wood shelf full of books and someone was sitting at the table reading.

The young man was born fair and beautiful, but indifferent, with a bit of laziness and fatigue. In his own house, he was dressed casually, and his cloud pattern brocade and blue jade belt made him look more and more heroic. There was a sword that hung on the wall, its color akin to frost and snow. Although it was inside the scabbard, still it looked majestic.

The door pushed open and someone came in.

The two people who came in were a man and a woman. The man showed a sevenfold resemblance to Xiao Jue but was not as cold as Xiao Jue. He had more gentle and clear air to him. His name was Xiao Jing, the elder brother of Xia Jue. Xiao Jing was followed by his wife, Bai Rong Wei. Although she was not a stunning woman, she was still beautiful and dignified.

The couple stood together, looking beautiful and pleasing to the eye.

“Huaijin,” it was Bai Rong Wei who opened her mouth. She put the parcel which was in Xiao Jing’s hand on the table and said, “These are the shoes and clothes we have prepared for your trip to Liangzhou, try them on later.”

Since the death of General Xiao and his wife, there have been only two brothers left in the Xiao family, Xiao Jing and Xiao Jue, and his elder sister-in-law was like his mother. In the past, the general’s wife used to mend clothes for Xiao Jue, but now it was Bai Rong Wei.

“Thank you, sister-in-law.” Xiao Jue nodded his head.

Bai Rong Wei smiled and said, “You brothers talk, I’ll go see if the soup is ready.” After she said this, she retreated.

After Bai Rong Wei left, Xiao Jing looked at Xiao Jue for a moment. Finally, he sighed and said, “Huaijin, you really need not go to Liangzhou.”

“Xu Jiefu has been targeting you frequently in the court and is looking for trouble with the Xiao family.” Xiao Jue looked unperturbed and only said, “The emperor listens to Xu Jiefu’s words, so I’m only causing trouble by staying in the capital. It’s good to go to Liang Zhou for a while to avoid the front. Besides, father’s death back then was full of suspicions, and this time, maybe I can find a clue and I might make a new discovery.”

When they talked about General Xiao’s death, the atmosphere in the room became dull.

After a long silence, Xiao Jing reached out and patted Xiao Jue on the shoulder, “You always think more than I do, but I can’t do anything for you.”

“Elder brother’s situation in Chao Zhong is more complicated. When I’m away, the Xiao family will rely on the elder brother.” Xiao Jue laughed, looked at Xiao Jing, and said, “Take care, elder brother.”

“You take care of yourself, too.” Xiao Jing felt a lot of emotions, perhaps to lighten the bitter atmosphere, he deliberately joked, “It’s not that I don’t want you to go to Liang Zhou, it’s just that you’re now at your prime, and it’s time for you to settle down. Now that you’re old enough, it’s time for you to get married. Do you have any girl you like or do you want your sister-in-law to look for you?”

When Xiao Jue heard the words, his smile disappeared, and his expression became more and more plain and finally became indifferent.

 “No need, I don’t intend to take a wife.”

# Chapter 32: THE ROAD TO LIANG ZHOU

Spring had finally come to an end. With the arrival of summer came the endless rain, quenching the soil and transforming the city into a misty wonderland.

It was the calm before the storm.

The capital city seemed to be void of it’s usual bustling, but the court was anything but that. Xiao Huaijin, the chief commander of the army, had been invited to lead the new recruits to Liang Zhou. However, Immediately after Xiao Huaijin’s leaving, the situation in the court had changed once again. The crown prince tried to keep it hidden, but it was quite evident he was both proud and self-satisfied.

The affairs occuring in the court were mainly irrelevant to the common folk, so there were little to no changes in their lives. It had been a few days, but the assailant of the Fan family’s young master still hadn’t been found. The Fan family had tried everything, but it was to no avail. Helpless and desperate, they could only turn to his wife. However, her family’s decisions were truly unexpected. After the young master’s death, the head of the Tang family had forced the head of the Fan family to annul their marriage, allowing him to bring back their daughter. He would never allow his own precious daughter, Tang Ying, to be widowed at such a young age. She was still in her prime, and had a future ahead of her.

Meanwhile, He Yan had become irrelevant, a supporting role in the accident. Her body was also nowhere to be found, but it was of little importance compared to Fan gonzi’s missing body. It was like she had never existed in the world, her family the only ones remembering her.

The light drizzle had become a downpour, obscuring He Yun Shen’s vision, and leaving him with no choice but to go out wearing his bamboo-rain-hat. After He Yan’s ‘accident’, he stopped attending classes at the institute, opting to stay home instead for five days. Today was the tenth day since he sent the letter regarding his leave. He was afraid that the Fan family would use some underhanded tricks on him, but he couldn’t bear to ruin the opportunity He Yan had won for him.

These days, he had been keeping himself busy by investigating his home, making sure there weren’t any guards monitoring him. He would only be at ease once he was sure.

He Yun Sheng hastily changed into his old clothes, as he didn’t want to attract attention to himself. He lowered his head, left through the back door, and went into the heavy rain.

During these past ten days, He Yun Sheng was living a life worse than death. He was unable to fall asleep, his body yearning to rest but his mind thinking otherwise. He wanted to hear about He Yan, but he was also afraid. There was no news about He Yan being captured and taken away by the government, so he assumed she was safe.

Nevertheless, he was curious as to where she went. If He Yan wasn’t in the capital city, where was she? Apart from the people in relation to the He family, she had no friends. She was bound to wander about aimlessly. He didn’t know if she had been sleeping well, or eating well. Has she been bullied? Thinking of this, He Yun Sheng’s footsteps became faster.

Liu Quan Ju acquired its name from the spring at the back and the row of willow trees beside it. There were few people in the tavern on this rainy day, so nobody paid much attention to He Yun Shen when he entered.

He still remembered what He Yan had said.

“If you ever find yourself at a tavern named Liu Quan Ju, look for the letter I left. There is a row of willow trees near the back. Dig down three inches under the third willow tree from the left.”

He Yun Sheng crouched down.

Dig down three inches down the third willow tree from the left.

The upturned soil was wet from the rain. He continued to dig, until his fingers were met with something hard. He Yun Sheng’s heart skipped a beat, and after a moment, a package was uncovered. Instead of opening it on the spot, he filled the hole he dug in with soil, and left with the package held in his arms.

After exiting the tavern, he started to break into a run. When he arrived, he noticed He Sui wasn’t there. Therefore, He Yun Sheng returned to his room, locked the door, and placed the package on his lap.

He had kept it in his arms the whole time, so it wasn’t wet from the rain. He Yun Sheng opened the package, and took a look at what was inside.

Inside, there was clothing and a letter.

He Yun Sheng decided to unfold the letter first. It was likely written in a hurry, as the paper wasn’t one for writing, but for packing food. One side of the paper was patterned, and both were full of creases and oil stains. On the other side without patterns, there were a few beautiful characters written in exquisite handwriting.

“I’ve enlisted in the army. I’ve departed for Liangzhou, where the mountains are towering and the rivers are broad. After the chilly spring and the scorching summer, we will surely meet again. Take care of yourself.”

He Yun Sheng gaped at what was written, but after a while, he understood, clenching his teeth and grabbing the clothing.

The clothing was the one she had custom-made at the old tailor’s shop. When He Yan and he had parted that day, they each wore the clothing to disguise themselves. This one had been neatly folded and sent back.

The material felt cold to the touch, reminding him of the girl’s cold smile and soothing words that day.

“Don’t worry, we’ll meet again.”

A hush fell over him.

However, the silence was soon interrupted by He Yun Sheng’s loud, desperate sobs.

 “Liar…”

He Yan, who had just been called a liar, didn’t know she was being scolded behind her back.

She had been busy on the road to Liang Zhou. This time, there were only around 20000 soldiers, but there were more on the way.

By noon, the soldiers were all sweating profusely. The sweltering summer heat had made it difficult to travel, forcing them to leave camp at the crack of dawn.

Hong Shan plopped down on the grass, picked up a tree leaf, and fanned himself with it. While gnawing at the dry rationed food, he asked, “Damn, it’s way too hot. When will we arrive?”

“It’ll take a little over two months to get to Liang Zhou.” He Yan poured water from the flask into her mouth, “take your time.”

“I miss the mung bean soup in Beijing,” Xiao Mai said while smacking his lips. “It was served in a bowl and soaked in the well for several hours. It’s sweet and cool, ah, so refreshing!”

He described it so delectably and in detail that everyone who was listening started to drool.

“Cut it out. Since you’re in the army now, you shouldn’t be going on about some mung bean soup. You should be grateful you’re not starving.” Hong Shan sighed. “Maybe we’ll be able to taste some if we get promoted and obtain a reward, just like General Xiao.”

He Yan had lots to say about Xiao Jue.

She had joined the army and followed them to Liang Zhou in her past life, traveling day and night with little to no rest. He Yan stayed in a separate tent at night, never having an encounter with Xiao Jue. He and his men were always leading upfront, but they also lived and rested in tents separated from the soldiers. From her time in Xiangchang institute, she knew Xiao Jue was an extremely particular and picky person. The second son of the Xiao family was born with a golden spoon in his mouth, resulting in him eating and dressing to his heart’s content.

Even if he was traveling with the rest of the soldiers, his life as a general was still much more comfortable and lavish than theirs. They were all young generals, yet they were all so different from each other.

She had become a soldier under him once again. He Yan sighed. After all, who would believe her crazy story? Her only goal was to earn military achievements and get promoted quickly, but Xiao Jue was the pickiest General out of all of them. He made it difficult to be a soldier, much less get promoted.

Even if she wanted to drop out, where would she go? She had already enlisted, so her only option was to wait and see.

# Chapter 33: ARRIVING IN LIANG ZHOU

The two-month journey from the capital to Liang Zhou was quite challenging. By the time they could reach Liang Zhou, everyone would be exhausted and much thinner. He Yan looked at her reflection in the water while she was sitting by the lake and scooping water. The real He Yan had fair skin, but after two months of exposure, she didn’t even need to wipe the dust on her face. Her skin tanned to wheat shade.

If the real He Yan came back at that time, she would strangle herself. Such a weird idea tickled He Yan, making her laugh.

“Ah~ Brother He, why are you laughing so happily?” Asked Mak.

Hong Shan glanced at He Yan by the lake and said clearly, “If we walk for another half a day, we will be in Liang Zhou before dark. Can we not be happy that the hard days are finally ending?”

“Yes.” Mak thought intensely and addressed Shi, “Big brother, are you happy?”

The quiet Shi nodded his head.

The journey of these two months was not an affair indulged in by ordinary humans. Even though most of the people who came to join the army came from a humble background, it was much more challenging than they had thought. Some people who were not in good health had lost their lives during the journey before they could even reach Liang Zhou. And now they could never go back to the capital again.

It was a road, from which there was no turning back.

In the evening, the army finally arrived in Liang Zhou. Liang Zhou was in the northwest of the country. They thought it would be desolate and barren. However, when they arrived, they found it to be prosperous. Although it could not be compared with the capital city, it was also lively and lush. He Yan walked along with everyone, thinking that Xiao Jue knew how to pick a place. Liang Zhou was much better than the desert county where she had first joined the army. When she first went to the Mo Xian prefecture, it was barren, and the people couldn’t even afford to eat, and the lives of their soldiers were tough.

After arriving at Liang Zhou, He Yan first had to go to Liang Zhou Guard, who was stationed at the foot of Bai Yue Mountain, where there was a large open area that was big enough to be used as an arsenal. It was the place where the soldiers practised on weekdays. They were staying in tents at night, but now they would be all staying in the Liang Zhou Guard’s guardhouse.

There were so many people, but the guardhouse didn’t have so many rooms, so only a dozen or so people could squeeze into a small hut and sleep in large communal beds. Naturally, He Yan was still with Hong Shan and the two brothers Mak and Shin. The few of them didn’t have any luggage, so they relaxed after finding a place to sleep in a shared bunk.

“I see there is a river near here,” Mak said excitedly. “Many people are bathing in the river. Let’s go too.”

“Yes, I’m already sweating from the heat!” Hong Shan removed his coat in a couple of moves and was about to run outside.

Mak looked at He Yan and said, “Brother He is not going?”

“He won’t go, he’s afraid of the water, we three will do!” Hong Shan shoved Mak and Shi out.

He Yan had explained, the first time Hong Shan invited her to take a bath in the river, saying that she had drowned when she was a child, and from then on she would feel dizzy and shortness of breath as long as she went into the water. Hong Shan was not suspicious of her, and honestly, He Yan was not lying, she was terrified of the water now.

Meanwhile, as soon as He Yan lied down on the big bunk bed, it made a “creak”sound. She could not help but frown. For a moment, she didn’t know whether it was because she was too thin or because the bed was so hard that it was excruciating. After a moment, she sighed in her heart, thinking, ‘It is easy to move from thrift to extravagance, but it is difficult to move from extravagance to frugality.’ After living in the barracks for three years and being a Miss for only one year, she became accustomed to the soft bedding and found the bed very irritating.

The conditions must be suitable for Xiao Jue. His bed must be soft. She thought it was unfair.

After two months of eating dry food and water on the road, it was on  the first day after reaching Liang Zhou, when they had a proper hot meal. Even simple steamed buns with plain porridge were steaming hot, and the recruits were sitting on the ground eating, not knowing the names of the delicacies they were gobbling down.

“This bun’s meat filling is so not much .” Hong Shan complained as he licked his fingers, “This is not enough.”

“It’s good enough to have a hot meal.” He Yan spoke up, “It’s better than dry food.”

“It doesn’t matter. I just inquired that there are many wild animals and rabbits on the Bai Yue mountain,” Mak said with a smile. “My brother and I can go hunting. We can hunt rabbits and boars. After that, we can clean them, string them on the branches, or wrap them in a leaf with some salt and roast them. It tastes very delicious.”

Mak was a foodie. After listening to Mak, Hong Shan was getting hungrier and hungrier. He swiftly drank the porridge in front of him and laid it heavily on the table. “Damn, I can’t wait to go up the mountain now.”

“The military order has the rule that you are not allowed to go up the mountain privately.” He Yan splashed the cold water on their beautiful imaginations.

“There must be a time to go up to the mountain.” Hong Shan was unconvinced.

After eating and drinking their fill, everyone cleaned up, and the practice commander in charge of the military training told them in advance that they would gather at the arena at dawn tomorrow morning and would rest early that day.

He Yan returned to the guardroom with Hong Shan. The room was already full of people, some of whom had already slept, some were still gossiping, unable to stop their excitement.

He Yan was sleeping in the innermost part of the bunk bed, sandwiched between Mak and the wall. Hong Shan spoke happily at the other end, “Compared to the past few days, today is simply the best.”

There was food, drink, bath and bed to sleep. We didn’t have to go out in the sun and rain and didn’t even have to be bothered by mosquitoes to sleep at night. It was so much better than before.

Mak whispered, “I think it’s easier to train here than to hunt in the mountains. And there are so many people to play with.”

He Yan, “…”

Silly boy, how could anyone conclude that the military training is easier than hunting in the capital? These people were all joining the army for the first time, and in the future, it would not be as easy as it was now. Having this meal was like a prisoner having a meal on the road before the execution, it would be a good meal, but also the last one too.

Tonight would be the most relaxing night they’d ever spent in Liang Zhou, and the real torture would commence the next day.

He Yan closed her eyes and let these silly children indulge in their sweet dreams for a while.

Sure enough, the next morning, before dawn, the sound of horns came from the open space outside the guardhouse.

“Well, it’s so early, can’t we sleep a little longer?” Mak rolled over and rubbed his eyes. He found that He Yan was already dressed and standing in front of the bed.

“Brother He, why are you up so early?” He asked in a daze.

“There will be a roll call at this hour if we don’t reach in time, it’d be considered a breach of military laws which will result in getting spanked by batons.” She said with a smile, her expression very fresh, looking like she wasn’t sleepy at all.

“If you don’t want to get punished, get up quickly.”

# Chapter 34: MAKING A COMEBACK

The sun shone brightly in the summer sky so the time to rise in the morning was earlier than before. Last night, when they had arrived at Liang Zhou, everyone was excited and inevitably rested a little late. They were all sleepy when they arrived at the arena, and some of them had their shoes on backward.

Shi was fine, but Mak and Hong Shan tied their belts as they walked. When they saw that He Yan was in high spirits and very energetic, both of them were confused and asked, “Brother He, aren’t you sleepy?”

“I rested early last night and slept well.”  He Yan replied.

Mak praised, “You’re amazing!”

As they had talked, they arrived at the arena under Bai Yue Mountain which was surrounded by mountains. Since today was the first day, they still stood in accordance with the previous line up. On the high platform stood a strong man in red, with thick eyebrows and big eyes. His posture was as tall as a tree and looked very imposing as he held a large spear.

“Who is that?” He Yan asked.

“The instructor in charge of overseeing our drills, Instructor Shen.” Mak was a chatterbox and had already made inquiries before he arrived.

He Yan nodded. She had originally thought that Xiao Jue would come to train the soldiers himself, but she didn’t get a glimpse of him today. Even though they were both young generals, each general had their own way of training. He Yan also wanted to see Xiao Jue’s method of being a master, but for the time being, it seemed impossible for her to do so.

“I am Shen Han, your chief instructor.” Shen Han’s voice was very sharp. As they listened to his voice, it felt like something drilled into their ears and made people’s scalps numb, “From now on, I will lead you.” He shook the military register and said, “Count the soldiers now!”

As today was the first time the soldiers were counted, it would take some time. After a few days, they would be divided into troops, brigades, and divisions, and the troops would be sent to their appointed commanders of the army, brigades, and the division  would save a lot of time.

The group of people were all skirmishers recruited from the capital. They had never received any training in the past. They stood in the training arena as they felt uncomfortable all over the body and sneakingly moved their bodies from time to time. Mak secretly muttered to his big brother, “Big brother, Brother He is not moving, he’s standing there like a stone.”

Shi glanced at He Yan and pondered.

It seems that He Yan should be called by his name more than he, himself. She stood upright, with her arms on her side and looked brightly at the platform, neither tired nor bored. This posture gave people the illusion that even after two more hours, she could stand still like that.

When Shi and Mak hunted in the mountains, there were wild animals in the mountains, and when the wild animals wanted to catch their prey, they would hide quietly in the grass, motionless, similar to an inanimate stone. He hunted with wheat for so many years – that’s why Mak and himself stood there motionless for an hour. How could He Yan accomplish this too? According to Hong Shan, He Yan joined the army because his family was desperate. He seemed to have a good family in the past. Why do such people have long-term patience and perseverance akin to wild beasts?!

After all, He Yan didn’t need to hunt.

His contemplation didn’t get an answer, and soon, the soldiers’ count was finished.

Instructor Shen closed the military register and said, “From today onwards, hundred people will be formed into one team, and will be assigned an instructor. Here we will train, drill, and charge the troops! What I want to teach you today are military orders!” At this point, Shen Han had a smile on his face, and for some reason, when this smile fell on the eyes of the crowd, they only felt a chill in their hearts.

Sure enough, they heard Shen Han who snapped, “The name will not be called! If the time of arrival is not right or if the troops are too slow, the offenders will be punished! Today you are all a moment late – you should have been dealt with by military laws! Since, it’s your first offense, you all are being spared.”

The people were carried up and down by his words, and as soon as they fell, they heard the emotionless voice of their cold instructor.

“Everyone would run around the barracks with sandbags on your backs – a total ten laps! Not even one lap less. The instructors from each team will be watching you. Whoever dares to be lazy will be dealt with by military law!”

 The crowd all sucked in a breath of cold air.

Bai Yue Mountain’s lower martial arts field was the barracks. One lap meant more than one mile, and ten laps would be more than ten miles. Moreover, they would also have to carry a sandbag. In comparison to when they got up today, they didn’t feel excited anymore. At this moment, some soldiers came down.The sun was high, and the heat hung at the top of their head. They all stood there sweating.

The idea of running around the arena, against the sun, made everyone full of grief.

Mak said, “Brother He, instructor Shen said exactly the same as what you said, how did you know he would say that?”

*How does she know?* Naturally, it was because when she joined the barracks back then, she was in the same situation. It was like a death stick – they would give the new recruits a head start and let them know that they didn’t come here to enjoy happiness. Even if it wasn’t one of stated situations, Shen Han would still find some other reason to punish them.

 “Memorizing more military orders,” He Yan patted the youth’s shoulder, “will be good for you.” Mak nodded even though he didn’t understand.

As expected, according to what Shen Han had  said, the many soldiers were divided into teams of a hundred men. Everyone went to get a sandbag. At first, He Yan thought that the sandbag would be just like the firewood  which she and He Yun Sheng used while going up to the mountain. But when she got to the end, her eyelids jumped.

The sandbag was the size of a baggage, which could not be tied to the leg, but only could be carried on the body. When it comes to heavyweight, the firewood could by no means be comparable to these sandbags.

“Damn it, it’s too much to run ten laps with this thing on your back!” Hong Shan complained.

Mak secretly looked at the face of He Yan. He Yan showed a very calm face from beginning till now. When he picked up the bag of sandbags, there was finally a change in his expression. Mak secretly breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed that Brother He was also an ordinary person, not omnipotent.

He Yan was speechless.

When she trained the new recruits back then, in order to increase the strength of the recruits, necessary weight running was supposed to be done in the beginning and it was all gradual. Most of the time, it was done with the sandbags she had made in Wo’s house, asnd the weight was increased little by little.

She did not know Xiao Jue’s method of military training before, but now she finally knew it. He was ferocious right from the beginning. Xiao Jue had a beautiful face, but she did not expect that he had such a ruthless heart, so she underestimated Xiao Jue’s ruthlessness.

*What a vicious guy…*

“Brother He, you.” Hong shan was about to ask if he wanted him to help carry the sandbag on his back when he saw He Yan picking up the sandbag and tying it neatly to her body.

He Yan was thin and small, and compared to the barracks full of men, she was like a teenager who had not yet grown up. The sandbag was too big and heavy and pressed against her back which made the teenager look even shorter. The image looked pitiful.

Shi was a man of few words but still couldn’t bear to watch, and said to her: “Are you alright?”

“I am fine.” He Yan replied.

Several people saw her smile and felt a little relieved, as they concluded that she was a young and strong child, and although she looked a little thin and weak, she still had strength.

In the meantime, He Yan scolded Xiao Jue ten thousand times in her heart.

Of course, there was no problem with such load-bearing in the past. But the original Miss He had a delicate figure, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t turn Miss He into Hercules overnight.

It was that heavy.

# Chapter 35: POOR QUALIFICATIONS

Everyone hurried to make a team of 100 and set out in turn.

It was a magnificent sight to see a huge troop running around the barracks at the foot of the mountain. Although everyone was complaining and yelling, there was no delay. The head coach in charge of He Yan’s team, named Liang Ping, was as ruthless as General Manager Shen. He yelled, “Quickly line up and set off!”

As soon as the order was given, everyone followed the team and began to run with the heavy load.

With such a large sandbag on her back, He Yan felt as if she was carrying a huge stone that pushed her body downwards making her unsteady. Ever since she had become the eldest Miss of the He family, she had been accompanying He Yun Sheng out to chop wood. Even though it made the eldest Miss’s weak body more fit, healthier and stronger than the girls of the same age, Xiao Jue’s iron-blooded method of training was a bit too much to bear.

In the past, He Yan could do this amount of training, but now, it was difficult.

There were more and more people around her, and most of the people who came to join the army were sturdy, tall and mighty, if they were not tall, they were born from poor families and were used to heavy work. Although it was tiring to run laps with a sandbag on your back, very few of them were weak like He Yan, and those who were, they had already died on the way to Liang Zhou. It could be said that in terms of physical qualifications, He Yan was the weakest one at the foot of Bai Yue Mountain in Liangzhou.

The two brothers Shi and Mak were fast paced because they were used to hunting in the mountains. They often had to chase the prey and after hunting it, they would tie it to their body. They were used to running with prey tied to them, so they were quite relaxed. Hong Shan was a little older. After running around, he was a little out of breath, wiped the sweat off his forehead, and said, “Hey, it’s really not a human’s job.”

He did not hear He Yan’s reply. He looked back and found that He Yan had fallen behind him by more than ten steps, so he slowed down a little and waited for He Yan to ask, “Brother He, can you hold on? You’re looking a little ill.”

He Yan looked pale and beads of sweat rolled down from her forehead to her chin and finally fell to her clothes. Carrying a sandbag on her back, she looked like those children on the docks of the capital who were sold by their parents to the gang leaders for hard labour. It was an unbearable sight to watch.

“I’m fine, Brother Shan you don’t need to worry about me, you go ahead, I can’t run fast, so let me run slowly in the back.” He Yan smiled, “You can go and have a rest in the shed if you reach early, don’t wait for me.”

“Why don’t you tell the instructor?,” Hong Shan hesitantly opened his mouth, seeing that no one around them was paying attention to them, he leaned closer to whisper, “Or secretly run a few less laps, no one will see you anyway.”

“I know it in my heart.” He Yan smiled and said, “Brother Shan, you go first, I’ll meet you later.”

Hong Shan repeatedly confirmed whether He Yan needed any help before running ahead with the sandbags on his back. He Yan scratched her head and gave a helpless smile.

Tell the instructor? How was that possible? If you got into the barracks, you would have to do it even if you couldn’t. Secretly run two laps less? How was that possible? It only looked like there were no people around, but these instructors were very clever, and there were many hidden supervisors on the side of the road. If she wanted to secretly run a few laps less, it would be a violation of military discipline and she would be dragged out to be beaten. When she was a general, she knew this stuff, and when she was a soldier; she had no reason to do this kind of thing.

“It’s just.” She wiped the sweat rolling on her eyelids and looked at the golden sun hanging over her head.

It’s so hot!

…………

Someone came out of the guardhouse.

Cheng Li Shu fanned the wind with the folding fan, looking towards the distant mountain peaks covered by clouds and mist, and spoke joyfully, “The scenery here is also wonderful, ten thousand times more beautiful than the capital! Uncle has such a good eye!”

Xiao Jue followed him, wearing a black and golden robe embroidered with cloud patterns, and a long sword hung on his waist. His eyes looked like stars, his lips were like vermilion, his aptitude charming and his appearance was beautiful. The ground also added a bright aura. He looked like a noble boy who just happened to pass by, adding brightness to the bitter and cold place.

“They’re running, tsk tsk,” Cheng Li Shu shook his head, “If I were to do this, I’m sure I wouldn’t last a quarter of an hour.”

“Then you go back.” The answer to him was a cold sneer.

 “Ah what did you say, the wind is so strong, I can’t hear you… Uncle, look who’s here.” Cheng Li Shu bluntly diverged from the conversation.

 The visitor was Instructor Shen Han, who stopped in front of the two of them, saluted Xiao Jue, and said, “Your Excellency.”

 “How are the new recruits?”, Xiao Jue asked.

“It seems that they’re not bad. Sometimes there are a few that can’t do it. Maybe they’ll be good with practice.” Shen Han replied.

“What’s the matter with that person?” Cheng Li Shu pointed to the distance, “He seems to be running and kneeling at the same time.”

On the long path, there was a short teenager running, his pace was so slow that it was hard to say if he was running. He had put a lot of distance between him and the front group, moreover, his delicate physique made him look like the sandbag on his back was heavier than himself.

 “That’s Liang Ping’s recruit, running the fourth lap.”

 “The fourth lap?” Xiao Jue raised his eyebrows.

The others had already started running the seventh lap, and this person had just started running the fourth lap, falling so far behind. He said lightly, “The qualification is too poor.”

Cheng Li Su and Shen Han looked at each other without saying anything. They were stunned by Xia Jue’s words, which was really bad because it meant that he could not go to the battlefield.

“It doesn’t matter if the qualification is too poor,” Cheng Li Shu thought of something and smiled, “It’s good to be a weaponsmith, in case he’s good at it.”

 He Yan herself, who was expected to be good at craftsmanship, was running so slow that she didn’t know what to say. The sandbag on her body was really heavy, but she had no choice except to continue. She clearly understood that physical training was just the beginning, and after a while, she would gradually get more skill training, such as crossbow and arrows.

But if she couldn’t even endure the physical training, she would not be qualified to continue the skill training and would be thrown out of the ranks.

Now, she felt that she didn’t want to be a soldier.

Near the shed, after running the last lap, Hong Shan finally found Mak and Shi who were resting in the shed and went over to sit down next to them.

Mak looked around and asked, “Where is Brother He? Didn’t you come two run ogether?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see him,” Hong Shan was also worried. “This boy can’t run, he might not have finished yet.”

“Didn’t you tell Brother He to run two laps less secretly?” Mak whispered, “No one would notice it anyway.”

“I told him! This boy is a stubborn donkey. He doesn’t listen to me. What can I do?” Hong Shan spread his both hands.

As they were talking, Shi suddenly spoke, “Here he comes.”

A few people followed his gaze and saw a teenager slowly running at the end of the long path. He was carrying a sandbag that was excessively large compared to his size, his hair was wet in locks, and beads of sweat were slowly dripping down his forehead to his chin and into the dirt beneath his feet. He ran past the vicinity of the shed and didn’t look their way. He continued on, starting a new lap.

“He still wants to run.” Mak murmured.

He Yan didn’t stop.

# Chapter 36: NARROW PATH

*Sixth lap, seventh lap…*

By the time He Yan finished the last lap, she looked as if she had been pulled out of the water.

Mak trotted over and handed her the kettle, “Brother He, please drink some water..”

He Yan looked up and gulped the contents down.

When he saw her drink the water, Instructor Liang passed by, looked at her up and down twice, shook his head, and walked away. That look clearly stated that He Yan could only be a fellow soldier.

“How did you even finish?” Hong Shan said, “What a dead brain, I think there were people running less laps next to me, they are smarter than you!”

He Yan was so tired that she didn’t want to speak, so she only said, “I don’t want to be a paramedic soldier in the army.”

“What’s wrong with being a paramedic soldier? Don’t underestimate the guerilla soldiers, people say they might not live longer than us.” Hong Shan disagreed.

“I think so too,” Mak looked longingly, “If I become a guerilla soldier, I will be able to cook more delicious food for everyone!”

He Yan replied tonelessly, “…If you want to work as a cook, then don’t join the army.”

Mak grievously looked at Shi, “Big Brother wanted me to come.”

*What kind of people are they?* He Yan thought as she sighed up to the heavens in her heart.

She was terribly tired and her legs were a bit soft. Both Hong Shan and Mak  helped her move forward, “It’s only the first day, how long can you persist?”

*As long as I can,* He Yan exclaimed in her heart.

With Chief Instructor Shen’s ruthlessness, the entire day was spent in fatigue. In the afternoon, the few soldiers who were lazy and hadn’t run ten laps were arrested and beaten by the military baton. They were called worse than chickens. It was like they killed the chickens to warn the monkeys to train properly in the afternoon. At that time, no one dared to slack off.

As He Yan thought, the first half of the month was all physical training. It was nothing more than running with weights, standing under the sun, and lining up. Half a month later, the skills training finally began, and when that reached a certain level, they started to divide the camp.

In He Yan’s previous life, she was in the vanguard camp. Now she still wanted to enter the vanguard camp, but the problem was, with Xiao Jue’s training method, she would be eliminated by the time she reached the frontier. After all, physical strength was now her weakness.

She thought this as she drank the porridge in the bowl.

The congee was thick rice porridge, with all sorts of wild vegetables, fruits, and beans in it. Half a bucket of rice in the morning, and a third of the millet for dinner, with some lumps of noodles in between. If it was some special occasion, there would be soup cakes, meat and so on.

But at the beginning, they had to be satisfied with the porridge.

It had a faint taste, but because she was exhausted, she felt rather hungry. Almost no one spoke at the place where they ate as they buried their heads and relished the food.

“It would be nice to have some wine.” Hong Shan smacked his lips. “I finally understand why people don’t choose to come to the army until they have no choice but to go. This is not something a human can do.”

“I want to hunt,” Mak glanced bitterly at Shi. “Brother, I want to eat a roast rabbit.”

Shi replied, “…Wait  for a few days.”

He Yan was amused. Even if he waited for another month, there was no chance of hunting. After entering the barracks, if anyone tried to run, they would be declared a deserter, and all deserters are to be executed.

After dinner, everyone went to take a bath. Hong Shan hesitated for a moment and asked, “Brother He, are you really not going?”

After a day in the sun, her whole body was sweaty and sticky. “The river is already full of people like dumplings”. Hong Sshan said, “Don’t be afraid, I will hold you and keep you safe from drowning.”

He Yan looked embarrassed, “Forget it, Brother Shan, I’ll wait until late at night, I’ll go to the river to grab a few buckets of water, and just flush it in the shallows.”

“Alright, then.” Hongshan didn’t force her, “You rest first.”

When Hongshan and the others walked away, only then did He Yan let out a sigh of relief.

It was really inconvenient to enter the army barracks. There were no separate rooms for the soldiers in the guardhouse, nor a separate tent in the field. Bathing became a big problem. She once lived a life of handcuffs, so she stayed on the embankment every night to avoid revealing herself, but then gradually, she was promoted to an officer, to a deputy general, then a chief general, and had her own tent room – these things were never a problem that time.

She didn’t expect to go back down the old road again.

He Yan lay down on the bed and rested for a while. When the people who went to the river to take bath came back one after another, everyone started to rest, and the snoring sound of Hong Shan woke He Yan up. She looked at the moon from outside the window and estimated that the time had come. She got up from the bed, jumped over Mak, rolled up her clean clothes, and sneaked out of the door.

Outside the Liang Zhou guardhouse, the field was empty, and a round bright moon shone. Maybe because it was the border, the moonlight gave a different feeling compared to the capital. He Yan crept to the river.

The river was around the guardhouse at the foot of Bai Yue Mountain, and it’s name was very interesting. It was called Wulu River. It was rumored that one day a fisherman who had lived by the river returned by boat late at night and saw a fairy who wore light makeup, dressed in plain clothes, and rode a five-colored deer on the river, hence the river’s name.

There were many boulders along the river. He Yan found a stone and placed the clean clothes behind it in order to not get them wet, then she proceeded to take off her outer clothes and then took a dip in the water.

What she had said to Hong Shan was true, because after the Xu family was drowned in the pond, she did not dare get too close to the water. She would not even come to the river if she had a choice. Therefore, even if she went in she would only stay in the shallow water.

The river was cold, and with the refreshing breeze,  the summer heat felt comfortable. He Yan wiped her face, and the tiredness of the trek with sandbags in the afternoon swept away, so now every part of her body felt comfortable and relaxed. Unlike the capital, the bright moon here was as cold as snow, and it shone in the boundless wilderness as it reached the river, having its own grandeur and elegance.

“Bai Yue Mountain, Wulu River…” He Yan whispered softly, the name indeed was extremely elegant. She looked at the silver moon and thought that all she was short of was light makeup and plain clothes. If a fisherman passed by here at this moment, he might take her to be the ‘beautiful fairy’ in the rumor.

She thought about it, and it seemed funny, so she laughed out loud.

“Who?” A voice rang out in the silence, strange and familiar.

He Yan almost swallowed a mouthful of river water into her belly.

No way. At this hour? There were still people coming?

The man’s footsteps paused first, and then came towards He Yan’s direction. He Yan was ignorant and immediately hid behind a huge rock in front of her. Because she was already in shallow water, she was not far from the river and was able to see the man clearly.

He was a young man who wore a dark blue gauze embroidered with a fairy crane, which seemed to flow with the wind. He was already handsome, with a cold and graceful look, and his eyebrows and eyes were beautiful and picturesque. Under the moonlight, the long sword on his waist felt like a long shard of ice which made his expression even colder.

This beautiful young man was the commander of the Right Army, Xiao Jue.

He Yan saw the man’s appearance clearly and wailed in her heart.

This really was a narrow path.

# Chapter 37: REPUGNANCE

“He- hey, yo-… you, don’t come any further!” He Yan was afraid the man would come in front of her, so she stuck her head out from behind the rock and said, “I’m naked! What are you doing?”

Sure enough, the footsteps came to a standstill.

He Yan breathed a sigh of relief. Based on her previous understanding of Xiao Jue, he was an extremely fussy person. Being naked was a misdemeanor in front of him, and he wouldn’t want to dirty his eyes.

“Who are you? And what are you doing here?” Xiao Jue stared at her and asked coldly.

“I’m a recruit from the guardhouse. I’m here to take a bath.” He Yan replied.

After he heard those words, Xiao Jue ‘s flashed a trace of sarcasm, which made it clear that he did not believe her. He asked, “Is this the time to take a bath?”

“There were too many people at night, so I fell asleep in my room.” He Yan looked at him, “I’m not an adult. If I had my own room to bathe in, who would want to run into the river at night to bathe? It’s too cold!”

This ‘adult’ referred to Xiao Jue himself. She hoped Xiao Jue could understand her sarcasm.

Unfortunately, Xiao Jue didn’t look ashamed of her words, just looked at her calmly.

He Yan sank herself into the river and asked, “Who are you?”

She thought,*Well, let’s just pretend to be an ignorant new recruit, it will seem more convincing.*

Xiao Jue didn’t answer her. Instead, he said, “If it’s too cold, then why did you join the army?”

Was that to refute what she just said? He Yan looked at her clothes behind the boulder. If Xiao Jue refused to go away, she would have to remain soaked in the water all the time. But if she stayed in the water for too long, she would inevitably arouse Xiao Jue’s suspicion about her identity.

“I came to join the army with a purpose.” He Yan said.

Xiao Jue raised his eyebrows, and asked, “What purpose?”

“Of course, it’s to make contributions, get promoted, become rich, and be a young, successful person like General Feng Yun. Then go home to build a house, marry the most beautiful and virtuous young lady, have a lot of children and grandchildren, and live a prosperous life.” He Yan showed a type of look, of one that yearned for the future.

 Xiao Jue’s eyes went cold, and he coldly rebuked, “Vulgar!”

He Yan was so happy in her heart that she purposely associated the name General Feng Yun together with the wishes of ordinary men under the universal sky to deliberately disgust him. Someone as proud as Xiao Jue must have felt humiliated in his heart.

“What’s wrong with that?” He Yan looked serious, “People join the army to become the happiest of men.”

As though he was unable to listen to such rambles from her, Xiao Jue glanced at her and whisked away, and looked like he didn’t want to talk to her anymore.

He Yan said behind him, “Hello, brother, do me a favor, please help me throw the clothes behind the stone.”

Naturally, Xiao Jue would not pick up clothes for her. He Yan waited until he was far away and was completely out of sight, washed herself quickly, ran to the stone, and changed her clothes.

The moon was silent, as if it hadn’t seen anything that had happened. He Yan held onto her dirty clothes and walked back, but thought about the scene where she saw Xiao Jue.

At this time of the day, Xiao Jue should not be here to do anything, so he probably just came out to walk around at random. After all, the night was so good.

Speaking of which, He Yan and Xiao Jue had not seen each other for many years. The last time she met him was at the academy. She feared that he would find out who she really was, so she bowed her head hastily, and was unable to clearly see the difference between Xiao Jue from the past and Xiao Jue from the present. It was rare to see him like this, but she felt that he was different from what she remembered.

She knew that Xiao Jue was born with unparalleled elegance and beauty, and many young girls would come forward just for one look from him. She didn’t know what he had eaten to grow up, but now it seemed that Xiao Jue’s style was much better than the past. In the past, Xiao Jue still had a bit of the youth’s unique frivolity, but now it was gone. He was like fine jade, like a sword in a sheath, with a subtle flow of brilliance.

His temperament was also much colder than before.

He Yan walked slowly.

She reminisced of the past. After a big quarrel with her family, she joined the army,  so she didn’t know what had happened in Xianchang Pavilion. At that time, Xiao Jue was the young master of the Xiao family, so everything was monotonous. After she left for the army, it took several years for her to learn about the situation of the second son of the Xiao family from the talk of the people around her.

Xiao Jue’s father, Xiao Zhong Wu, was a brave general of the Wei Dynasty. He defeated enemies, such as the Iron Plate of the Wei State, with almost no effort nor many resources. However, when he attacked the Southern Barbarians, he was ambushed by the enemy in the First Battle of Mingshui and died in the hands of the enemy leader. After General Xiao died, Xiao Jue took over the troops and continued to lead the troops to attack the southern barbarians.

He Yan was fifteen years old when she joined the army, and Xiao Jue was only one year older than her. She didn’t know what happened but only knew that Xiao Jue, a sixteen-year-old boy, took over the soldiers and horses from his father, which was certainly not a simple task. The Xiao family’s political opponents, like the royal family, would also not miss this opportunity.

If Xiao Jue was defeated, the entire Xiao family would be defeated as well, and as a family of military generals, the Xiao family would never be able to survive with just one scholar holding them up – the eldest son of Xiao.

Fortunately, thanks to his extraordinary good luck, Xiao Jue not only won but also made a grand victory. He defeated the Southern Barbarians, left them to crumble, and returned to the capital with the head of the enemy general. At this point, he established his reputation as the “Young General” and “Jade Faced Governor”.

War is the fastest way to sharpen one’s character, and all types of edges must be put away in front of life and death. Perhaps at that time, Xiao Jue still had the arrogance of a noble son in the capital, but now it could no longer be seen.

A better, more indifferent, more unfathomable, and a man more difficult with.

He Yan went to the door of the room, where everyone slept soundly. No one noticed her. She put her clothes at the foot of the bed, lay flat on her back, closed her eyes, and felt peaceful. Fortunately, Xiao Jue was not the only one who grew up over the years. She was also the same as Xiao Jue.

It wasn’t that bad.

# Chapter 38: COMPETITION FOR FOOD

“He- hey, yo-… you, don’t come any further!” He Yan was afraid the man would come in front of her, so she stuck her head out from behind the rock and said, “I’m naked! What are you doing?”

Sure enough, the footsteps came to a standstill.

He Yan breathed a sigh of relief. Based on her previous understanding of Xiao Jue, he was an extremely fussy person. Being naked was a misdemeanor in front of him, and he wouldn’t want to dirty his eyes.

“Who are you? And what are you doing here?” Xiao Jue stared at her and asked coldly.

“I’m a recruit from the guardhouse. I’m here to take a bath.” He Yan replied.

After he heard those words, Xiao Jue ‘s flashed a trace of sarcasm, which made it clear that he did not believe her. He asked, “Is this the time to take a bath?”

“There were too many people at night, so I fell asleep in my room.” He Yan looked at him, “I’m not an adult. If I had my own room to bathe in, who would want to run into the river at night to bathe? It’s too cold!”

This ‘adult’ referred to Xiao Jue himself. She hoped Xiao Jue could understand her sarcasm.

Unfortunately, Xiao Jue didn’t look ashamed of her words, just looked at her calmly.

He Yan sank herself into the river and asked, “Who are you?”

She thought,*Well, let’s just pretend to be an ignorant new recruit, it will seem more convincing.*

Xiao Jue didn’t answer her. Instead, he said, “If it’s too cold, then why did you join the army?”

Was that to refute what she just said? He Yan looked at her clothes behind the boulder. If Xiao Jue refused to go away, she would have to remain soaked in the water all the time. But if she stayed in the water for too long, she would inevitably arouse Xiao Jue’s suspicion about her identity.

“I came to join the army with a purpose.” He Yan said.

Xiao Jue raised his eyebrows, and asked, “What purpose?”

“Of course, it’s to make contributions, get promoted, become rich, and be a young, successful person like General Feng Yun. Then go home to build a house, marry the most beautiful and virtuous young lady, have a lot of children and grandchildren, and live a prosperous life.” He Yan showed a type of look, of one that yearned for the future.

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It wasn’t that bad.

# Chapter 39: THE WEAK ARE PREYED UPON BY THE STRONG

“I said, that bread in your hand is mine.” He Yan replied calmly.

As the words fell, the man laughed and grinning gloomily he said, “Boy, don’t look for trouble.”

 “I’m just trying to get my stuff back.”

The person looked at He Yan, the teenager who was born very feeble and stood like a little child who hadn’t grown yet. The army’s crimson colored uniform looked wider and slightly longer on him and he was also shorter than an average boy.

The child barked at him like an ungrateful pup barking at a wolf, which looked ridiculous.

“Your stuff?” Before He Yan could react, The scar-faced man disdainfully grabbed the meat bun and stuffed it into his mouth. He gobbled up the meat bun, which wasn’t very big, in a couple of bites as if a beast had caught its prey and couldn’t wait to eat. When he finished eating, he looked provocatively at He Yan and smiled strangely, “Yours? Who can testify? What can you do to me?”

The food had already entered his stomach, and He Yan couldn’t possibly slit his stomach open to get the steamed bun back. After the other party finished saying his words, he looked at He Yan’s helpless appearance with pleasure and walked forward nonchalantly with the porridge bowl in his hand.

“What can I do to you?” He Yan muttered to herself. After a while, she smiled and turned around, taking three steps towards the scar-faced man, who was bending over to drink the porridge in the bowl. She kicked the porridge bowl and the porridge in his hand spilled on the ground, leaving nothing behind. He then turned his head in rage to see who had kicked it, seeing that it was He Yan he gritted his teeth and shouted, “You!”

“Me?” He Yan said with a smile, “Who can testify that I did it? What can you do to me?”

The young man’s eyes were cunning, with a hint of subtle provocation that was infuriating. The scar-faced man raised his fist and moved forward.

“Hey, what do you want?”

At this time, a voice rushed out from the side. It was Hong Shan and Shi who came over. When Mak saw that He Yan had been talking with the scar-faced man for a long time, he guessed that something might have happened and called his elder brother and Hong Shan over.

Hong Shan and Shi, unlike He Yan, were not bullied easily as they both looked strong and sturdy. The scar-faced man didn’t act on impulse, he only snorted coldly while staring at He Yan and said, “You wait for me.” Then, he turned around and walked away.

The tone was extremely harsh and threatening.

“What’s wrong with you?” Hong Shan asked, “What happened?”

“He stole my steamed bun, and I spilled his vegetable porridge on the ground, fair enough.” He Yan tried to say it as simply as possible. Hong Shan understood as soon as he heard it, looked at He Yan and said, “Hey”. He then gave out a sigh and continued, “Why did you pick a fight with him, you should have just endured it.”

 “Why should I endure?” He Yan asked.

She had encountered these kinds of things from time to time in the past when she was in the army. In the barracks, there were often incidents of the strong bullying the weak. When she was in the barracks, it was common for her to be robbed of her food. If it wasn’t for her brothers who took pity on her and gave her a share of their own food, she might have starved to death.

The instructor in the barracks could stop the open conflict, but not that kind of secret robbery. Moreover, she was too weak at that time, so weak that even the instructor didn’t bother to talk to her, let alone seek justice for her. Until later, when she became strong, and no one dared to take her food. And later, when she became a general, she ordered all the new recruits under her command to never take food from anyone and to never bully the weak.

Who knew that she would be born again and would have to encounter exactly the same circumstances? But this time, she was no longer the poor recruit who had just entered the barracks, trembling and aggrieved to dare not say anything. Even if Hong Shan and Shi did not appear, she would have been enough to teach this scarface a lesson.

“That man’s name is Wang Ba,” Hong Shan said, “He was originally a bandit, but I don’t know how he ended up coming to join the army. He’s the fiercest one under Instructor Liang, and I’ve heard from people that this kind of man kills like a sore thumb, and you provoked him today. If he harbors a grudge, he will definitely stumble you in the future. Brother Shi and I can’t follow you every day, in case he exploits you… your life would be difficult.”

“I can’t just sit and do nothing when he steals from me. Brother Shan, you have to believe that if he can steal one time, there will be a second time, and if he comes back day after day to rob me, will I still be able to live?” He Yan said, “Things are not so fair in the world.”

“Things in the world aren’t fair in the first place.” The one who spoke was the ever-quiet Shi, who looked at He Yan and gently shook his head, seemingly disapproving of what she had just done, “You’re too impulsive.”

“If there’s no fairness, we can fight for it ourselves, if we can’t fight for fairness because we’re too weak, we can try to become stronger.” He Yan smiled slightly, “If fists are the only thing that makes sense here, then let him come to me, I promise… I’ll let him know what fairness is.”

The boy spoke lightly, and his expression was calm. There seemed to be a slight smile in his clear pupils. The wind blew, and his hair flowed with the air, not like a soldier, but like a noble child walking down the streets in the capital. They were reminded of a joke ‘newborn calves are not afraid of tigers’, but when they were met with those eyes, they couldn’t dare to utter those words.

 Was it true that a newborn calf was not afraid of a tiger?

He seemed confident, not reckless.

Shi and Hong Shan did not say anything else. The two accompanied He Yan to the tree. Mak knew that HeYan’s meat bun had been robbed and felt very sorry for a while, and finally said in a clumsy way to comfort her, “It’s okay, Brother He, in a few days we can go up to the mountain. There, I’ll make a few slingshots to shoot birds, or get a few traps to catch rabbits. We’ll eat meat then, it would be much better than the meat present in that steamed bun.”

He Yan laughed and responded happily. After drinking the porridge in the bowl, she rested her hands behind her head and leaned against the tree trunk to take a nap.

The sun was shining lazily, and there was a rare coolness under the tree. She closed her eyes, her heart turning back and forth.

Although the meat bun was a bit of a pity, it shouldn’t go so far, as to haggle over it all the time. When she used to march and fight, her military pay sometimes could not keep up with her needs. She was forced to defend the city, forget meat buns or vegetable porridge, sometimes she had to gnaw the bark and grass roots. And during the worst times, she had to eat Guanyin soil, making her stomach bloated, but even then she defended the city to death.

Comparing it with that time, this was better and considered pleasant.

The wind blew across her cheeks and He Yan curled up her lips. If she guessed correctly, in five days at most, the skill training would begin. Some people would be assigned as guards, and with her current physical strength, she could probably qualify for skill training, but how could she show her worth in that short amount of time and prove that she was worthy to go to the Forward Battalion?

That was a problem…

# Chapter 40: **PASSING THE TEST**

He Yan guessed right. Three days later, when she was running with a sandbag on her back, Instructor Liang shouted, “From tomorrow, running around the barracks will be changed to five laps. As for the remaining time we will do weapons training! So today, run with all your might! If you can’t run well, there will be no lunch at noon.”

Everyone got excited upon hearing it. Compared to running with a bag of sand on a hot summer day, weapon training sounded much easier and it was more like what a new recruit should do. Being able to end this purgatory and enter a new phase could just be an indication that they had gradually become a decent soldier of the Wei Dynasty.

However, He Yan understood the implication of Instructor Liang’s words. Today was the last “test”. If the runner was not good enough to keep up with his physical strength, he would no longer be qualified to do the following weapon training.

He Yan bent over to carry the sandbag. At that moment, someone passed behind her and suddenly bumped her body heavily. She stood up straight to look at the person. It was the scar-faced man who had robbed her of the bun a few days ago. Wang Ba looked at her with a shrewd smile, “Boy, as soon as today is over, you will be a guerrilla soldier, and your good days will be over.”

He Yan shrugged, “I don’t understand.”

“Those two brothers of yours won’t be following you all the time, a guerilla soldier…” he lowered his voice, a hint of tyranny flashing in his eyes, “No one will care even if I killed you!”

“Then try it.” He Yan swung the sandbag on her back, smiled at him, and said, “By the way, I won’t be a guerilla soldier, absolutely.” With that, no matter what expression Wang Ba had, she turned around and went along the way.

Mak followed her nervously and asked, “Brother He, he didn’t embarrass you or give you a hard time just now, did he?”

“How can it be?” He Yan replied with a smile, “We just chatted a few words.”

“Oh, okay.” Mak laughed again, “Brother He, you are so amazing, you can run with us now without huffing and you’re still being fast!”

Mak and Shi grew up in the mountains since childhood, as hunters they had to go out to hunt all day long and utilize so much of their physical strength, it was obvious their running was fast. On the other hand, He Yan’s feeble and reluctant start was obvious to everyone, but now, she was getting more energetic and relaxed every day, making people wonder if she had taken some kind of magic pill.

“Really?” He Yan nodded solemnly. “I really have a lot of potential.”

On the other end, the instructors gathered around the edge of the long forest path to observe the situation.

The daily long-distance running for more than half a month was not only to train the physical strength of the recruits but also to judge the qualifications of the recruits. They have been recording it every day, and today was the last time. After today, long-distance running would no longer be a means of judging qualifications. It would become a part of the common training because being able to carry out weapons training, meant that the person was qualified to become a recruit of the Wei Dynasty and would not die before the war, at least not for reasons related to their physical strength.

There was also a distinction between the strong and the weak in the barracks, and the contrast was even sharper. Those with good qualifications stood out from the start, and those with poor qualifications were bullied from the very beginning. This was an unfair thing, after all, no one could change it.

However, there was an exception.

“Lao Liang,” someone patted instructor Liang on the shoulder. “That boy named He Yan in your team is really a talent.”

He yan was the exception.

Her qualifications were so poor that she was uniformly evaluated by the coaches from the very beginning. Even if she happened to become a guerrilla soldier, everyone was afraid that she would be fumigated by the fire, but she was getting lighter day by day, and now she was able to keep up with the team steadily, even at the front of the team.

It was really a miracle.

“Dripping water pierces a stone; a saw made of rope cuts through woods.” Teacher Liang was very proud, “I have said it a long time ago, I, Liang Ping will not be mistaken. This kid’s will is hard to come by, nothing he does will be bad.”

“Don’t talk big,” the instructor who poured cold water on him was called Du Mao. He spoke disapprovingly, “You also know that qualification is aptitude. The reason why he can keep up with the team is based on hard work.”

That was true, the crowd looked at the young man who was running with the group; he was just the right age, described as optimistic, and looked downright pleasant. He was also very disciplined when running, seldom spoke to the people around him, and ran seriously. In short, it looked like he was very serious about doing this.

 “He worked very hard to reach this stage, while the others didn’t need to work hard.” Du Mao said, “Now it’s just a long run with a sandbag on his back, in the future, the weapon drills and battle deployment maneuvers will only become more and more complicated, and he will also have to put in more effort than others. In this way, he will never be top notch and can only be an ordinary soldier.”

“I advise you to put more effort into the well-qualified recruits in your team, and not pay too much attention to that kid,” Du Mao shook his head, “There’s no point.”

“I can’t be bothered to talk to you.” Liang Ping was not very happy with his words, he took his spear and walked away.

However, as he walked away, he also murmured in his heart. Those who were leaders of the army had led a lot of soldiers. Those who could survive or make contributions on the battlefield were often those who were amazing and outstanding at the beginning.

That boy could only work hard… but hard work. Was it really useful?

He Yan ran through today’s share in one breath, received her meal and ate it. She waited until the afternoon, when suddenly the instructor Liang came and ordered ten or so soldiers to follow him away.

“Hey, those seem to be the ones who are going to be the guerrilla soldiers.” Mak said, “But does the guerrilla team need so many people?”

He Yan smiled and shook her head, “It’s just a name. It’s not just all cooking, but there are other things. In short, you don’t have to fight directly with people on the front line.”

“That’s quite good,” Hong Shan stretched his back, “Isn’t it good to live without having to fight with your life, right?”

“But Brother He must be very happy this time,” said Mak, “You don’t have to be a guerrilla soldier!”

He Yan was reluctant to be a fellow soldier, it was something that everyone knew, and she didn’t argue, just smiled and said, “Grateful.”

 “Aren’t they going to give you a chance to show off right away?” Hong Shan poked at her and spoke derisively, “You’ll be able to show off your skills in the next weapons drill, right?”

“Well, not really.” He Yan thought for a moment before answering.

Knives, arrows, and horsemanship were the things she could do well, lance and step siege weren’t difficult either, after running for so long, climbing and charging was also of no problem, the only difficulty was probably the crossbow.

The crossbow required a great deal of hand strength and it was difficult for people who were not physically strong to pull it away. With the original Miss He’s physique, it might become a problem.

However, Xiao Jue would not come up with the crossbow for military training, would he? She thought.

But she was wrong.

# Chapter 41: **CAN’T DRAW THIS BOW**

When they got up the next day, as Coach Liang said, the distance of their lap was reduced by half, so they finished early, even before dinner.

After their run, all the recruits were dragged to the arena.

The arena field next to the Liang Zhou Guard station was huge, probably because there was a large open field at the foot of the mountain, large enough to accommodate everyone. He Yan sized it up and thought that this was indeed a good place to train. At noon, when the sun was at its most blazing moment, and there was no hint of wind, the flags on the high platform clung to the flagpole, just like the recruits who were scorched by the sun.

“From today onwards, you are about to start weapon training.” Instructor Shen threw his spear to the ground heavily. The crowd shook and braced themselves to look at him.

“You see the clearing?” Shen Han pointed his spear to the north.

Next to the open space near the weapon rack were rows of more than a dozen crossbows, which stared menacingly at them, and the targets neatly stood a hundred paces away in front of the crossbow.

“Starting from today, you will  learn the crossbows!” Instructor Shen gave an order, and the next few days were automatically arranged.

Everyone didn’t know whether to cry or laugh for a moment.

“Wow! Archery is my favorite!” The happiest one was probably Mak. “Brother, this time it’s our turn to shine!”

He Yan turned and asked Shi, “Your hunting bows aren’t as heavy as these, right?”

He looked at the crossbow for a while, then shook his head. “No, it’s lighter than this one. Our bows are not made of horns, but from the bamboo I sharpened myself.”

“Almost the same,” Mak looked cheerful, but then suddenly thought of something, and asked He Yan, “Brother He, can we use this bow to go up the mountain to hunt rabbits?”

He Yan spared a glance at him, “…Train well, don’t dream.”

They were divided into teams, with each team led by an instructor to practice the crossbows. One instructor demonstrated. He drew the bow and released the arrow, which flew right into the center of the target with a solid “swish”.

A burst of cheers erupted from the recruits, and the instructor looked very proud of himself.

He Yan couldn’t help BUT praise him in her heart. Liang Ping was no fake, he was really capable. Such people were also good at the battlefield.

The soldiers in the barracks were very excited and eager to try their bows. Some who were born with great power drew their bows fully. Although they weren’t able to shoot accurately, the arrow still went far. Some had basic knowledge about bows and arrows, so their focus was on their postures. Many of the recruits, who had the strength but not the aim, shot in a twisted manner, and the arrow fell in midair before they reached the target.

In the end, they all got one turn to show what they have.

Hong Shan went up to try it as well. Although he was born sturdy and was good at drawing the bow, his aim was not good enough, so the arrow fell before it could reach the edge of the target. Regardless he felt satisfied, nodded to himself, and muttered, “Yes, not so bad.”

The two brothers Shi and Mak followed suit. Out of the two, Shi was more firm and strong. The feathered arrow flew out of his hand with a “swish” and fell into the target, and although it was not exactly in the middle, it was still somewhere near.

Instructor Liang glanced at him unexpectedly and asked, “What’s your name? Have you ever touched bows and arrows before?”

“My name is Zhong Shi, I used to be a hunter,” Shi said solemnly.

“No wonder.” Liang Ping nodded in satisfaction. There was a good seed in the team, so he was naturally happy.

The younger brother also went up and introduced himself. “My name is Zhong Mak, I am his brother, and I am also a hunter!”

“Oh?” Teacher Liang looked forward to it and said, “Are you here to try?”

Mak followed Shi’s example and drew his bow. But, he didn’t have the impressive skills of his elder brother. The arrow shot off the wrong side and didn’t even hit the target.

Liang Ping, “…”

Mak touched his nose and retreated sadly.

He Yan was a bit amused. Just when she thought about whether she should try it as well, someone stepped out ahead of her.

“Oh,” Hong Shan whispered beside He Yan, “it’s him.”

It turned out to be Wang Ba, who hadn’t paid any serious attention, even when he ran on previous days. Wang Ba was a soldier under the same instructor as them, Instructor Liang. He stepped forward, rolled his sleeves to his elbows, spat on his palm, and picked up the bow.

He Yan saw that he was a man of great strength. His arms were so tightly disintegrated that the strong honey-colored skin was faintly visible. Unlike the other recruits, Wang Ba wasn’t as eager to shoot the arrow. He took a sigh of relief and aimed it straight at the middle.

This look… He Yan knew that this wasn’t his first time drawing a bow. Like Shi, he must be a good hand who did archery often.

Finally, there was a creak from the tight string, and the feather arrow went straight to the bullseye. Everyone only saw a flash of white light in front of them, and then the grass target standing in front was rushed by the strength of the arrow and fell to the ground with a bang.

All the other arrows were missing from the center of the target, only a single arrow could be seen. Not only did he shoot through the grass target, but he also brought the whole target down.

He Yan sighed in her mind as that was quite an amazing shot. Wang Ba was strong and steady, his aim was good, and his composure was rare. Instructor Liang’s gaze toward Wang Ba was already different. Among this batch of recruits, there was Shi and Wang Ba, both who excelled in the line of crossbows.

Wang Ba put away the bow, but didn’t leave immediately. Instead, he walked two steps in front of He Yan. The scandalous-looking scarred man cupped his hands to his chest, looked at He Yan with a look of watching a good show, and said, “It’s your turn.”

It was fine until he said it. When he did, the gazes of many people around them turned to He Yan. While she faced Wang Ba’s provocative gaze, He Yan stepped forward.

The bow was a good horn bow, very smooth to the touch. It had probably been used countless times before, as it showed some visible traces. He Yan stroked it bit by bit, and the past times in the army suddenly appeared in front of her again. The last time she used a crossbow, she was still ‘General Fei Hong’.

In a flash, so many years had passed, just like that.

Liang Ping looked at He Yan with a strange expression.

He knew that crossbows were different from other things and required great hand strength. He had already judged He Yan’s physique and previous performance, and knew that she wouldn’t be able to perform well. But… this was another hard-working recruit. People had expectations for the unknown situations that may arise. Liang Ping himself felt very contradictory.

“What are you feeling around it for? Don’t waste other people’s time,” Wang Ba sneered. “Why don’t you show us your superb shooting skills?”

He Yan picked up the bow and placed her fingers on the arrow.

After a moment, she set the bow and the arrow down.

“Brother He, what does this mean?” Mak was puzzled. Why did Brother He put down the bow before he even started to draw it? Was there something wrong?

“Why aren’t you moving?” Wang Ba was dissatisfied, “Move!”

“No need,” He Yan said with a frank expression, “I can’t draw this bow.”

# Chapter 42: **THE WEAKEST IN THE ARMY**

“I can’t draw this bow.”

The nearby recruits looked at He Yan with a dull expression. Instructor Liang’s face showed a look of disbelief, and he almost thought that he misheard him.

What does he mean ‘I can’t draw this bow?’ Does he take it for granted, saying something like that so confidently? Instructor Liang had led many soldiers, but this was the worst one he had ever seen!

It really pissed him off!

“What nonsense are you talking about?” Wang Ba didn’t expect He Yan to be so frank. He thought that He Yan was arrogant and naturally had some unique skills in his hands. But this result was simply unacceptable.

“I don’t have enough strength in my hands, which is why I can’t draw this bow. Why should I waste time? It would be better to give the crossbow to the brothers who need practice. In a few days, my hands will be strong enough to draw the bow.”

“He Yan, the practice field is not a place for you to play.” Instructor Liang said with a sunken face. He had assumed that this young man would work hard and endure hardships, and his determination would surely lead him to succeed. He didn’t expect him to take his incompetence for granted.

“I didn’t take it as a place to play.” The boy’s eyes were clear. He pondered for a while, then made a concession, “Then how about after training today, I will attempt to draw this bow tomorrow?”

Instructor Liang’s nose was crooked in anger, “He Yan!”

He Yan actually thought to bargain with him! Does He Yan regard this guardhouse as a vegetable market? He was very satisfied with the progress He Yan made so far in the run, as he improved day by day, but a crossbow is not a simple matter. The strength in hands was not something that could be achieved overnight. Where did his confidence come from that he even blurted that he could draw the bow by tomorrow?

Now, Head Instructor Liang began to regret not heeding to Du Mao’s words. Instead of paying too much attention to He Yan, he should’ve placed him as a guerilla soldier earlier, which could’ve saved him the trouble of dealing with the current situation.  At his age, there was nothing he could do, even if he was angry.

Not wanting to see He Yan’s innocent face, Teacher Liang waved his hand to him, “Fine then. Go over and run five laps with a sandbag on your back!”

He Yan let out an “Oh”, obediently walked over and picked up the sandbag, and went up the long road.

Even though she did as she was told, her obedient behavior felt like a punch on the face of Instructor Liang, which made him even more frustrated. He turned his head and decided not to look at the boy who made him angry.

He Yan ran slowly, and there was one more person beside her, the person who provoked her earlier, Wang Ba.

“Kid, you are so weak, you still dare to come to the barracks?” Wang Ba smiled wildly, “You can’t even draw the bow, and you still dare to speak out?”

“This brother,” He Yan said as she ran, “You stare at me all day long, are you really afraid of me?”

“Afraid of you?” Wang Ba was taken aback.

“If you are not afraid of me, you wouldn’t have to follow me all day for the fear that I will steal your limelight.”

“Who is afraid of you?” Wang Ba simply wanted to yell at her. What kind of person was this? No words entered this person’s ears or affected him in any way, and instead, he interrupted the words in his own set of opinions.

“You might be aware that private fights are forbidden in the army,” He Yan made a “hush,” motion to him, “If one gets caught, they’ll be dealt with a military baton. There are supervisors everywhere in the mountains, even if you want to pick a fight with me, now is not a good time.”

That was true.

Wang Ba stared at her, smiled, and said, “If I wanted to pick a fight with you, why would I do it in private, you can’t even draw your bow… In the arena, I can make you kneel and beg for mercy.”

“Oh.” He Yan responded carelessly, “Okay, let’s see you in the practice field. Until then, I don’t want to see your face.” After she spoke, her pace seemed to quicken. She carried her sandbag on her back and left Wang Ba far behind.

Wang Ba looked at her brisk back, only to feel dazed and cursed. After that, he turned and walked away.

…

The crossbow training finally ended after the sunset.

The recruits rushed over for food, eager to fill their stomachs, while the instructors gathered together to eat their dinner and talk about the anecdotes of their respective teams today. If there were recruits with good qualifications, they were even more likely to show them off.

Liang Ping wanted to boast about Wang Ba and Shi, but when he thought of He Yan, he felt stuffy and was afraid of her name being mentioned, so he simply bowed his head to eat in silence. Unexpectedly, as he became more and more afraid, Du Mao asked without concern, “Instructor Liang, how did your team’s He Yan perform today?”

Liang Ping had nothing to say.

An instructor next to him laughed and said, “He! Haha, he gave up before he drew the bow, and even said, ‘I can’t draw this bow.’ His tone was calm, but the expression felt sarcastic, which seems to be ironic. Instructor Liang was so angry at that time, his face turned blue.”

“Didn’t even draw the bow?” Du Mao was also surprised, “That’s ridiculous.”

“That kid doesn’t look like someone who can stay in the barracks. You don’t know, at the time, he even said that if he gave him a day, he would be able to draw it tomorrow. I said ‘Where did Instructor Liang pick up such a treasure?’ I doubt him,” the instructor who spoke nudged his head, “There’s something wrong here.”

As they talked, someone came in. It was Xiao Jue and Cheng Li Su. Everyone immediately put down their chopsticks and stood up to salute “General Xiao, Noble Cheng.”

“I heard you all were talking lively about something from afar… so, what were you laughing about?” Cheng Li Su asked with a grin.

This young man who was used to having a happy appearance happily ate and drank in Liang Zhou these past few days.  Although they didn’t know why the well-dressed and well-fed ‘Noble of the Capital’ wasn’t at home with his good fortune, and instead came to Liang Zhou. Moreover, he was brought by Xiao Jue, so they must give him a bit of face and dare not neglect.

The instructor who talked about Liang Ping at the beginning spoke first, “We were talking about the training of the recruits today. There is a recruit under Instructor Liang who can’t even draw the bow and said that he would be able to draw it tomorrow. Master Cheng, don’t you think it’s funny?”

“Hey, he can’t even draw the bow. Wouldn’t he be worse than me?” Cheng Li Su was shocked. He was already known as the weakest scholar and soldier among his brothers in his family. But he could definitely draw crossbows. He didn’t expect to be able to meet someone weaker than him here, so he immediately became interested. He turned to look at Xiao Jue, “Uncle, did you hear that? At least in Liang Zhou, I am not the worst.”

Xiao Jue glanced at him, but seemed to not care. After he got a cold response, he was not annoyed, but instead turned to several instructors, and enthusiastically asked, “What is the name of that strong man, who shares the same aspects as me? I must meet him and become brothers with him.”

Liang Ping, “…”

“Hey, Instructor Liang, what’s the name of that recruit?,” The instructor who spoke strained his memory and recalled, “He…what was after that?”

What did he do wrong, why did God treat him like this? He was embarrassed in front of the General, Liang Ping wanted to cry a little, but under all the eyes, he bit the bullet and said, “He Yan.”

The young man who had always been indifferent raised his eyes suddenly.

He Yan?

# Chapter 43: **NIGHT TRAINING**

He Yan sat with the brothers Shi and Mak.

Hong Shan looked at He Yan with such a sad look as if his eyes would suddenly start dripping water, “Brother He, you can’t even pull a bow, what are you going to do in the future? Why don’t we go talk to Instructor Liang and ask him to make you a guerilla soldier? It doesn’t sound very glamorous, but  the life there is really good, isn’t it, Mak?” He nudged Mak with his elbow and gestured for Mak to say a few words as well.

Mak followed and agreed, “That’s right Brother He, even if you become a guerilla soldier, we’ll still visit you often.”

He Yan smiled but didn’t say anything.

Hong Shan was really anxious. Compared to his pampered and sometimes troublesome brother, He Yan was much more sensible. He was very understanding, so much so that he unconsciously started treating him as his own brother.

He Yan couldn’t even draw a bow, and if he went to war, he’d be the first one to die. How could he idly stand by while his brother jumped into the fire pit?

“Brother Shan, don’t worry about me, I’ll be able to draw the bow tomorrow.” She reassured him.

“Do you think you’re a Spiritualist? That whatever you say will just come true?” Hong Shan was furious, “Why doesn’t this child get the hang of it?”

Instead, Shi, who had been silent for a while, asked, “Do you have any tricks?”

He Yan shook her head. “I’m a person whose qualifications have never been good from the start. There are many things that I can’t do, so I have no choice but to try a few more times. Once I try a few more times, I’m pretty sure that I can make it.” He Yan sighed.

The world knew of General Feng Yun as a natural-born general and a genius. In fact, it could be considered miraculous – she was a woman, so her natural physical strength was weaker than that of a man. In other words, her current qualifications were definitely not good. It took her many years to turn He Yan into a brave and invincible general on the battlefield, but she was reborn once again and given such a weak body.

It is true that “when heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on any man, it will exercise his mind with suffering, subject his sinews and bones to hard work, expose his body to hunger, place his joy to poverty, place obstacles in the paths of his deeds, to stimulate his mind, harden his nature, and improve wherever he is incompetent”. She didn’t expect to become brilliant, but it would be fine to make herself as strong as Wang Ba.

Accomplishing this will be a lot easier now as compared to the past!

He Yan thought about it until night arrived.

The new recruits were tired all throughout the day, so they naturally slept soundly at night, and snored incessantly. He Yan estimated the time and climbed up from the bed.

Mak rolled over and muttered something. He Yan stopped for a while, but before he could wake up, she tiptoed and left the room through the door.

She went straight to the practice field. It was empty, and the summer night winds gently blew the colored flags like quiet, dancing flowers. Under the moonlight, the greenery reflected the silent moonlight.

The borders were always bitterly cold, so the situation in Liang Zhou was already considered good. This kind of calming, desolate scenery, she hadn’t seen since she stationed troops in the past. For some time, she stood there in silence, as if she couldn’t bear to tread any further on this quiet night.

Some of the crossbows from the daytime had been taken in, which left only one or two, but those were not easy to move. The straw targets were all over the place, but tomorrow, new recruits wouldl tidy up the place after their morning run. He Yan walked over to the row of straw targets and searched for a long time, fumbling in the darkness for an arrow, until she found the right one that was beside her. She took the arrow and walked back to the crossbow.

What a normal person could easily accomplish, would take her much longer. But she couldn’t give up now. If she couldn’t do it on the first try, she could only practice again and again with all her might.

She tried to draw the bow, but it was too heavy; the string barely moved. It was really hard to notice if it was pulled or not.

She put the bow down and rubbed her wrist.

She picked up the bow and tried again, but it was still the same as before, no improvement at all.

After five or six attempts, she finally got better. This time, she was able to draw the bow farther than before, and she could finally see that it was moving.

He Yan sighed in relief.

In fact, what she said to Instructor Liang before was not entirely true; she herself was not very confident, as Miss He hadn’t been in contact with any heavy object since the past ten years. When she first arrived at the He family, she only chopped one piece of firewood, and her hand was already worn out. But at that time, the situation forced her to do so. If she couldn’t draw the bow tomorrow, that’s another matter. The worst-case scenario was to play coy with the instructor and fish out a few more chances.

In this world, it’s better to make an effort and fail than not to make any at all. She had no talent, so the only thing she had in her bag of skills was effort. But there is also something in this world that can’t be obtained even if you work hard all your life, and that is the heart.

She had sacrificed everything for the He family and dedicated all her love to Xu Zhi Heng. She had worked so hard but to no avail.

He Yan’s eyes drooped, her fingers clasped the bow to shoot an arrow. This arrow seemed to vent all her pain, making a rustle in the dark as it headed towards the straw targets.

But the arrow didn’t hit on the straw target and fell powerlessly halfway through. She was still too weak to draw the bow and shoot the arrow out.

Not every pain could be vented to the fullest.

He Yan smiled and got up to pick up the arrow. She started to walk towards the arrow when she suddenly noticed something and looked up. Ten paces away from her, a pair of brocade boots, embroidered with golden dark patterns were shining magnificently in the night.

There was someone here? She was so focused on practicing the crossbow that she didn’t even notice. He Yan straightened up and took a few steps forward so that the person standing in the night could be revealed.

It turned out to be Xiao Jue.

The practice field was so large and it was only illuminated by moonlight. He stood behind a straw target, dressed in dark clothes, so he was almost hidden in the dark.

The handsome young man looked at her indifferently, without any intention to explain. He Yan felt a little wretched for no reason. She settled down and cleared her throat, deciding to pre-empt the situation.

“Who are you? What are you doing here?”

“Watching you practice arrows.”

It was clearly a cold tone, but He Yan distinctly heard a hint of sarcasm.

“What’s wrong with me practicing arrows? What do you think after watching it?” He Yan asked.

The beautiful young man restrained his eyebrows. His long eyelashes, under the moonlight, resembled butterfly wings, trembling tenderly, yet his tone was cold, with a bit of mockery.

“I’m surprised that there are people who work so hard and are still so vulnerable.”

He Yan was stunned.

For a while, time and space seemed to overlap, and as the sound of the wind slowly faded away, the night stars spread out across the long sky. The figure of the young man in front of her gradually blurred into that of a teenager, whose voice fell to her ear, with a feeling of déjà vu and mockery:

“I didn’t expect someone to work so hard and still be a weak chicken.”

# Chapter 44: **When the Moon Was Bright**

Before going to Xian Chang Hall to study, He Yan always felt that she was pretty good.

After entering the Xian Chang Hall, He Yan had doubts. Did she really take another step forward on her path?

All the students in Xian Chang Hall were children of noble families. Not only were they rich and powerful, but they also had a good family background. It was impossible to compare her family to those who were wealthy or relied on earldoms to live on. If it wasn’t for the fact that He Yuan Liang was a personal friend of her mentor, her mentor wouldn’t have been able to place her down through the back door.

On one hand, He Yan was very happy that she could enter Xian Chang Hall, but on the other hand, she was filled with misery about her daily life in Xian Chang Hall.

There was no reason other than her grades, which were a bit too miserable compared to the other kids there.

The He family had taught her to use men’s etiquette and behaviour on the outside, but she hadn’t learned much about the things inside. When she first arrived at the Xian Chang Hall, she was so ignorant that she was often at the butt of jokes and her tutor couldn’t do anything about it.

If she said her liberal arts were better…  It was because she had read and memorized a few more times, and listened attentively during lectures. She could barely get by with an average score. But when it came to martial arts, it was a total failure.

Since He Yan was a child, she had been sneaking off to the back of the mountain to help the monks fetch water to practice her hand strength, and she thought she was decent enough, resulting in her first martial arts screening test in the Xian Chang Hall to become a spectacle.

Be it bow, knife or stones, she wasn’t qualified in any of them. She tried horse riding but fell down, and the arrows missed their target. Even the Instructor shook his head and sighed. The surrounding teenagers pointed at her and laughed. Someone said, “You aren’t a woman, are you? How come you don’t know anything? Are you usually at home learning to do embroidery?”

He Yan panicked and stood up from the ground. Patting the dust off of her body, she thought to herself that if it went on, her identity would be disclosed. If anyone found out her identity, she would be taken back by Madam He and would have to stay at home again. She was not sure if she would be able to do that, but it was better to study and practise hard to stay safely in Xian Chang Hall.

And hence He Yan embarked on the road of “studying hard”.

There was no such thing as chiselling the wall to steal the light[1], nor was there such a thing as the sacred firefly reflecting the snow[2], or smelling the rooster and dancing[3], neither was there such a thing as hanging the beams[4]. He Yan often cursed in her heart while practising calligraphy, horseback riding, archery, and also handling swords.

She tried her best and could only struggle on the edge of her tail. So to her, the proud sons of heaven who could easily get the top spot without having to work hard seemed very dazzling.

Xiao Jue was one of them, and the most annoying one.

This young man was born a prodigy, but with a mind of a mule. He had a superior and refined family and had collected a lot of affection from people. He came to the academy every day but was often late to class. Sometimes he left early and usually didn’t seem to pay much attention to the class. Yet he was always first in both liberal and martial arts.

He Yan was confused. God had already given him the beauty and honourable status, why did he have to give him wisdom too? Couldn’t he give some of it to her?

God didn’t answer He Yan, so she could only make up for her poor qualifications with tears in her eyes.

Gradually, He Yan’s “Sword, Horse, and Bow” began to show results; though not as good as those youths who were accompanied by their parents and brothers to practice since childhood. Sometimes at their practice sessions, she could fight for the third to last place.

He Yan felt satisfied working hard to gain something.

When it was time for Xian Chang Hall martial arts division, which was at the back of the hall to distribute the weapons. He Yan chose a sword among the weapons. That sword, she felt, was lighter than other swords and less strenuous to wield.

However, her swordsmanship was also a mess.

The He family hadn’t hired a martial arts master to teach her in the house alone, so He Yan had no foundation at all, even her horse stance was crooked. The instructors of Xian Chang hall had no hopes for her either. They only watched her and waited to see if she was able to defend herself. What kind of gentleman didn’t bring a few servants with him?

However, He Yan felt that it would not work.

Since she had chosen, she should train her sword well. The students could only go home two days in January and lived the rest of the time in the Xian Chang hall. She sneaked out in the dark at night and went to the courtyard of the academy to practice her sword.

The school was elegantly built. When the moonlight was good, the wind rustled the bamboo groves, the shadow of bamboo shoots and cypresses were cast by the moon and the pond was full of red carp. Experts practised their swords there, waiting for the world to change, and would appear whenever there was chaos.

He Yan was quite happy to practice. If only she ignored her crappy swordsmanship.

Like accidentally chipping off a corner of her clothes, accidentally hitting her head with the sword sheath, accidentally tripping…

She heard a soft chuckle.

In the night, with that inexplicable chuckle, He Yan crawled up nervously. Did she see a ghost?

She saw a person sitting on the stone bench in the small courtyard, wearing a white robe and brocade boots, with bright eyebrows. It was Xiao Jue, the proud son blessed by the heavens.

When Xiao Jue looked down at her, she put her hands behind her back and vigorously wiped the sweat on her clothes. She calmly asked, “What are you doing here?”

“Watching you practice your sword.” The young man replied lazily.

“What… What’s there to see?” She summoned the courage to answer. She had never been fond of talking to the teenagers in Xian Chang Hall. They didn’t like her and were always bullying her.

Xiao Jue looked at her for a moment and suddenly stood up. While she was caught off guard, the boy was already in front of her. She was a girl, born not as tall as a boy, so she could only reach up to the teenager’s chest. She raised her head and could see the other’s clear jawline, and those beautiful, gentle, slightly cool eyes like autumn water.

“It was just a coincidence.” The young man gently curled the corners of his lips. He was born with a heroic and beautiful appearance. With a smile, he was comparable to the cool night of the whole courtyard which was more moving than the moonlight. However, the words he uttered were ironic, “Someone is making so much effort but is still a weak chicken.”

He Yan, “…”

She shook Xiao Jue, picked up the sword, and ran away; her heart indignant. The heavens were fair. Giving that young man beauty, talent, and family background, but not a good heart.

That person, she hated him!

After that, He Yan still sneaked out to the courtyard every night to practice her sword, thinking that hard work made up for her clumsiness and effort was better than lack of it.

But what made her angry was that Xiao Jue had followed her every night since that day. While she practised, he sat on a stone bench and read a book by candlelight. And while she fell face down and cut several pieces of her clothes, he watched her make a fool of herself with grace and elegance.

While she was still trying to work hard to maintain the sprint away from the bottom, the other person didn’t make any effort and was still top-notch.

The one working hard still worked hard, the one relaxing still relaxed. Spring and autumn came and left, as did winter and summer. The teenager had grown into a youth, the girl’s face changed. The only thing that remained unchanged was the night sky in the Xian Chang Hall and the crescent moon in the backyard at the end of the bamboo shoots.

**Glossary**

[1]  *Chiselling the wall to steal the light*: Literally, it means that one works hard to bore a hole and steal some light from it’s neighbour. Which signifies a person with limited resources, or suffering from poverty, trying very hard to achieve success.

[2] *Sacred firefly reflecting the snow*: Snow reflects the light from teenie-tiny fireflies. This term is generally used to describe how a person, despite their miserable condition, works hard. It implies the spirit of hard work.

[3] *Smelling the rooster and dancing*: Literally, it refers to rising even before rooster crows to practice dancing. Indicates the hard work a person put into a certain activity.

[4] *Hanging the beams*: refers to practice of tying one’s hair on the house beam and jabbing one’s side with an awl(tool/weapon used to poke holes) to keep oneself awake. Reflects the efforts someone put into doing something; a person’s diligence.

# Chapter 45: He’s changed

The color of the night was like the thick ink in a picture scroll, and the stars were like embellishments, shining in it, along with the sound of the wind making the scene a bit poetic.

The man with beautiful eyebrows and straight eyes raised his head to look at the young boy seriously. Looking at the picture alone, it was a beautiful scene.

He Yan was silent.

Xiao Jue spoke with a faint voice, “Your name is He Yan?”

He Yan was shocked and blurted out, “I’m already so famous?”

She thought among the people in barracks; she was not good enough to alarm the general. How could even Xiao Jue know her?

Xiao Jue sneered, “The last runner from the weight-bearing run, and a person who can’t even draw the bow.” He looked down at the top of He Yan’s hair, condescendingly, and understated, “Still so short, among the people in the barracks, I can’t think of anyone else.”

He Yan, “…”

So…short…

In an instant, she seemed to be back at the time when she first met Xiao Jue at Xian Chang Hall, and Xiao Jue gave her a character evaluation: stupid and short.

Unexpectedly, after a change of body, Xiao Jue saw her, but he still said this? He was really as always, so arrogant, and unkind. Looking at him in this way, the indifference brought about by growing up into a young man, with the impression of excellence from almost a mean teenager.

He Yan was naturally aggrieved too. To tell the truth, she cannot be called “short” among women. Only in a barracks full of sturdy men, she appears weak as a chicken. But it’s no wonder. When she was He Yan, she was a little taller than now, and after He Ru fei replaced her, others did not think that General Fei Hong was short. But now, she can’t put cushions in her shoes to appear tall.

While she was immersed in her thoughts, unpredictably Xiao Jue took another step closer, so the distance between her and her was a little too close.

He Yan was stunned in place.

His eyes were beautifully shaped, clear, and gentle. When he looked at her with his eyes downcast, it gave one the illusion, as if he was looking at a lover. His skin was also very white, more crystal clear than Miss He, and his eyebrows were more and more picturesque. The blue silk was tied up and hung on his shoulders. It also looks cool, with a hint of Yuelin fragrance. making people really want to touch it.

He Yan thought to herself that the fairy riding the deer would turn around ashamed if she saw this person. It’s no wonder why so many women in the capital’s spring boudoir dreamed of this nobleman, facing him, one could never get tired of this face for a lifetime.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked indifferently.

“Thinking about what I should eat to look as good as you.” He Yan replied.

His movements became stiff. He stopped making his way closer as if he had verified some results. He looked away and muttered: “Boring.”

He didn’t even curse? He Yan was surprised. She thought that Xiao Jue was going to use out the military order to scold her, but it suddenly became clear to her that Xiao Jue hadn’t identified her yet. Xiao Jue has not yet. According to common sense, she should not “know” who he is, so she can only be like a stranger who accidentally bumped into her practicing in this area.

“What’s so boring about it?” He Yan blew out her forehead hair and said in a daunting voice, “Everyone has a desire for beauty.”

Xiao Jue paused and looked at her fixedly as if looking at a dead person. He Yan stared back fearlessly. He probably never had seen a person like her. Xiao Jue was also startled. After a while, he seemed to sneer, turned, and strode away, leaving He Yan alone in the practice field.

He Yan discovered something.

Xiao Jue’s temperament is colder than before, but it is also better than before. In the past, when he became angry with her, he could sarcastically answer ten or eight sentences without repetition, but now he just glanced at her and didn’t want to talk to her. She didn’t dare to provoke Xiao Jue back then, but now the noble second son of the Xiao family disdains the tit-for-tat confrontation with others as she did when she was a child. Doesn’t that mean she can casually piss Xiao Jue to death and avenge the damage he did to her heart back then?

The Gods are fair, she thought, and came out with “The wheel of fortune is finally turning to my house.”

Good.

…

After Xiao Jue left, He Yan pulled/draw the crossbow for another half an hour, and went back to sleep when her hands were so sore that she couldn’t tolerate it. The next morning, she woke up a little later, and Mak pushed her,

“Brother he, get up.”

Only then did He Yan opened her eyes.

When it comes to human bodies, they are really different. When she was a teenager, no matter how late she practiced the sword secretly in the middle of the night, she could still go to listen to her husband’s lecture the next day energetically. Now it’s just a night, and it’s not too late, but still, she felt exhausted all over.

Could it be that her last life was really hard life, He Yan reflected on herself like this.

Introspection returns to introspection, what should be done is still to be done. Today, as usual, she started running with sandbags. After running, everyone consciously went to the back of the practice field with the recruits in the team to prepare for the archery.

The crossbow has been put up long ago, and the coolness of the night was gone in the daytime, and the daylight was a little dazzling. Instructor Liang stood beside the crossbow, and the recruits went to try the bows one by one. Compared with yesterday, the recruits were not so excited, and their technique was a lot more stable. There were fewer shots that resulted in the mess, at least they were all aimed at the target.

Hong Shan also went to shoot, and he shot better than yesterday. Shi still won the praise of Instructor Liang. Although Mak’s hand strength wasn’t great, he was not very bad, and because Shi, his brother, was there to give him advice, he made significant progress.

He Yan saw Wang Ba again.

Wang Ba stepped forward unhurriedly, before drawing the bow, he even gave He Yan a contemptuous look. He Yan replied with a smile that seemed to irritate him. He immediately sank his face, drawing the bow and shooting arrows without thinking.

With a “swish”, the feather arrow pierced the air and passed straight through the grass target. It was almost the same picture as yesterday. The grass target was taken forward and fell down.

The recruits around immediately applauded. People here always worship the strong.

Wang Ba put down his bow, walked to He Yan, and said aggressively, “It’s your turn.” He deliberately raised his voice so that everyone around could hear, “You couldn’t draw your bow yesterday, in front of everyone you said you would be able to draw it today. Brother He Yan, let us see, how will you draw the bow, how about it?”

For a moment, all eyes turned to He Yan.

He Yan’s name was almost known to the entire barracks. Everyone knows that there is a recruit under Instructor Liang, who can’t even pull/draw the bow, and dares to speak ruthlessly. Seeing the real person at this moment, they all looked at He Yan, waiting to see what was going on.

“Brother He…” Mak timidly pulled the corner of her clothes.

He Yan smiled at him and slowly walked out. She met Wang Ba’s unkind smile, with an open expression and a humble tone, “It must be hard for brother to remember my words so clearly.”

“You want to see it so much, I’ll let you see.” She said lightly.

# Chapter 46: **I WILL DEFEAT YOU**

Everyone stared at He Yan’s movements.

He Yan walked over to the crossbow which looked gigantic compared to her small frame. She picked up the crossbow, took out an arrow from the quiver, and put her finger on it.

Wang Ba looked at her with disdain and said, “Put some effort into it, don’t be like yesterday –  putting up a fight for half a day and then finally coming to say you can’t pull it off.”

He Yan behaved as if she hadn’t heard him, but Hong Shan was a little nervous and sweated secretly for He Yan. These new recruits in the army were inherently strong, and according to him, He Yan was not a woman, so people would not have any thoughts of pitying him. They would only feel that he was weak, and the weak inherently didn’t deserve sympathy, but if you add a trait of a person who likes to talk big, it would only make people look down on him even more, just like He Yan did yesterday. If he couldn’t do it today, not only would the instructor secretly despise him, but in the future, the people in the barracks would be ashamed and wouldn’t be friendly to him.

Yesterday, he gave up without even drawing, but today will he be able to pull the bow?

The young man gazed at the target of the arrow, and from this direction, his hand was extremely steady, his sinking eyes looked like those of a hunting beast, who was waiting quietly for the moment of leaping. The bow was drawn.

Little by little, not easily, but slowly, without any trembling, it was pulled. Unlike yesterday, you could tell the bow was slowly opening up.

“It’s moving…,” Mak excitedly tugged on the corner of Shi’s clothes, “Brother, Brother He has drawn the bow!”

He knew that If He Yan said he would be able to do it, he would do it –  it had been proven so for how many times?!

Wang Ba was stunned at first, and then immediately felt angry at being hit in the face. He stood there with his teeth clenched as he wanted to see what kind of superb shooting skills He Yan could display. On the other side, Instructor Liang, who originally had no hopes, was also attracted by He Yan’s actions.

This kid could do it. Yesterday he said he could draw the bow today, and today he really did it. Could it be that yesterday he was playing with a pig and eating a tiger[1], and simply said he wouldn’t, just to be in the limelight right now?

In the midst of the discussion, the bow had been opened nearly halfway, and He Yan stopped moving, and did not continue to draw down any further.

This was already her limit. She let go of her hand and the arrow steadily, swiftly went towards the target! The crowd couldn’t stop their stares at the tail feathers of the arrow intently. The feathered-arrow headed towards the arrow target did not reach the target, and fell weakly in the middle. The watching crowd let out a regretful sigh, as if the arrow should have undoubtedly hit the center of the target.

He Yan withdrew her hand.

Mak was the first to jump out. He ran to He Yan’s side, his eyes shining as he said, “Brother He, you really drew the bow!”

“Remarkable!” Hong Shan also came over and patted He Yan’s shoulder, “There you go!”

Although Shi didn’t say anything, he smiled, showing that he was happy. Instructor Liang also gave He Yan an affirmative look.

The surrounding recruits who watched the fun discussed the proceedings.

“He really pulled it off, and it doesn’t look like he’s lying.”

“It’s luck, it just happened to be a lucky pull.”

“Luck is also a form of strength, and he did what he said, not bad.”

Wang Ba was a bit confused.

He had come to watch He Yan make a fool of himself, how come in the end, it was as if he made He Yan the center of attention. He looked at the arrow that had fallen in the middle –  He Yan hadn’t even hit the target’s edge. This would be considered a very poor result if done by anyone else, so why did the people here clap and celebrate for him?

*Did he make a mistake?* Wang Ba was unconvinced, “Isn’t it just drawing the bow? There are many men in this barrack that can pull the bow. I’m afraid it’s all but you. Where’s the greatness?”

“Me?” He Yan pointed at herself and laughed, “But I’m the exception that can’t pull it, I couldn’t pull a day ago, and a day later I did, that’s called amazing.”

She curled her eyebrows and laughed happily. This smile fell in Wang Ba’s eyes, and it turned his heart over in anger. He said, “I’m not convinced!”

“What are you dissatisfied with?” He Yan asked.

Wang Ba was a bully who worshipped the strong and despised the weak. He looked at people who were ‘frail’ like He Yan with a bad eye. In addition, there was a history of bad blood between him and He Yan, so he was unhappy that he didn’t find something wrong with He Yan.

“How can someone like you become a recruit and train with us?” Wang Ba turned to Instructor Liang, “Instructor Liang, I’m not convinced!”

Instructor Liang looked at them without moving a muscle as he did not intend to intervene. He was the instructor, not their superior. After this batch of new recruits were trained here, they might be stationed at the Liang Zhou Guard, or they might follow Xiao Jue to other places, but they were not his people anyway. His duty was simply to teach them basic skills, pick some good seedlings, and at the end of the line, it was all up to the generals.

Who would want to lose Wang Ba who was very talented with a crossbow for a He Yan who didn’t look particularly good?

“You don’t need to embarrass Instructor Liang.” He Yan took one look at Liang Ping and knew what he was thinking. The instructor here was very cunning. There must be trade-offs at times like this. She looked at Wang Ba, “Tell me what you want.”

Wang Ba sarcastically smiled, “You go and be the guerilla soldier.”

“No.” He Yan refused without further thought, “On what grounds?”

“On what grounds?” Wang Ba, “Just because you couldn’t pull the bow yesterday, even if you pulled the bow today, you shot so poorly and your friends actually cheered for you. In the future, when it comes to the battlefield, will all the soldiers and generals be like you, with their crossbows in disarray, unable to kill a single enemy, and still need someone to cheer for them? What kind of soldier is this!?!”

*Wow,*He Yan couldn’t help but applaud Wang Ba in her heart. It was said that the big old bandits were poor in literature, now it seemed that they placed their words rightly. When she had just entered the barracks, she was not so eloquent yet she was worthy of being the leader in the mountain. If she couldn’t bluff, how could she be the boss?

Fortunately, she had been in the barracks for so many years, and it was not that she had never seen this battle.

“Yes, you’re right.” The young man brushed away a lock of hair that had fallen on his forehead and paused before he spoke, “But as you can see, yesterday I couldn’t pull the bow, but today I can. Yesterday you shot this target with arrows, and today you still did the same.”

The crowd looked at her, not understanding what she meant by that.

“I’m getting stronger day by day, but you’re just the same after a day. In this case, ten days later, I can hit the straw target, but you, you will still be the same, hitting the straw target just as before.”

“In ten days, I will win over you.” She said as she punctuated every word.

# Chapter 47: **THE APPOINTMENT IN TEN DAYS**

“In ten days, I will defeat you.”

Announcing in a loud voice, the boy smiled brightly. The sunlight gleamed in his eyes like shining gems.

For a split second, Wang Ba actually doubted himself.

Startled by his own suspicion, he secretly spat at himself for being frightened by a bratty kid. He had lived most of his life, was he still no match for a weak chicken-like brats? A yellow-mouth kid[1], tongue-tied, self-righteous and reckless!

He snorted coldly, “He Yan, do you have any idea what you are talking about right now?”

“Do you want me to repeat it again?” The boy said with a smile, “Since you have bad ears, I’ll say it again. In ten days, I will defeat you.”

“You!” Wang Ba clenched his fists.

“Brother He is crazy…” Hong Shan muttered. Wang Ba’s crossbow shooting skills were evident to everyone. Although He Yan had improved a little bit from yesterday,  being able to hit the target with a single arrow, that wasn’t something that could be practiced in just ten days!

It was understandable that a young man could be angry and put down harsh words, but what if he goes too far and it backfires later?

“What will you do, if you can’t beat me after ten days?” Wang Ba said as he bit his molars. He decided not to grind his lips with this young man. He Yan was thick-skinned. If you ridiculed him, he might not take such a thing too seriously.

“If I can’t beat you, I’ll be a guerilla soldier.” He Yan replied quickly, “But if you can’t beat me…”

“I’ll be a guerilla soldier!” Wang Ba said loudly.

“I didn’t say that,” He Yan shook his head, “Even if I want you to be such a soldier, Instructor Liang will definitely not agree.” She looked at Liang Ping intentionally.

Liang Ping thought about it in his heart, “…”

Evil, how could this kid know what he was thinking? Wang Ba had such a good qualification, if he volunteered to be a guerilla soldier, the head instructor would kill him!

“Then say it!” Wang Ba said impatiently.

In He Yan’s mind, she suddenly went back to the past when she was a youngster in Xian Chang Pavilion, where the teenagers loved to gamble. As the number one in Xian Chang Hall, Xiao Jue was entangled and challenged many times when he was young. What did he say at that time? She remembered the time when that young man had slept on the rocks in the academy. He was woken up and sat up annoyed. He lazily said to the classmate who came to challenge him in horse riding and bow and arrow, “Fine, if I lose, I will do what you want. But, If you lose,” he hooked his lips, “You will have to call me Father.”

He Yan pondered upon, and felt that the scene now was very similar to the previous one.

But she couldn’t let Wang Ba call her Dad.

“Well, I heard that you are acquainted with the leaders in the mountains and you’re their boss. If I beat you, that would mean my ability is above yours. You will need to call me Boss in the future. How about it?” she said.

This request was really unheard of.

Everyone looked at He Yan, who was not as tall as Wang Ba, whose arms were as thin as firewood, and then looked at Wang Ba who was tall and big, with fists bigger than He Yan’s face, as he stood there silently.

“Your ambition is apparently not small.” Wang Ba stared at He Yan with a deadly grin.

“To be honest, before I joined the army, I also thought about falling into the grass and being a bandit.” He Yan looked very grateful.

She had run away from the He family back then. As she carried her baggage at night, she hesitated several times at the gate of the city, and even more between the two roads. One way was to go directly to the south, and the other was to go west and join the Fu Yue army. If she chose to become a bandit, she would live a life of being free and uncontrollable, but, in case the harvest failed and no one passed by, they would have no option but to starve. Some officials came out to suppress bandits, so they would often have to hide, which was not very respectable.

Although it was a bit harder to join the army, the soldiers got to eat royal food, also it saved one’s face.

However, neither of them accept women, so she has to pretend to be a man in disguise. Thanks to her ability to act like a boy since she was a child, she was able to rise up step by step.

When she thought about it now, she sighed.

As He Yan reminisced about the past, Wang Ba was even angrier. This kid in front of him seemed to be only fifteen or sixteen years old, so why did he look  so mature? He was reminiscing his past however, did he even have a past to miss about?

“Alright.” He tried to keep his anger from cutting off the boy’s head, and squeezed  a few words from his teeth, “If you want to be the boss, it depends on whether you have the ability.”

“Okay!” He Yan arched her hands towards the nearby recruits, “I’d like to ask all you to bear a witness to this gambling agreement. In any case, we will see the result here in ten days! Good luck to myself!” She snapped her fingers and felt at ease. They didn’t know if she really was talented, or had any tricks in her hands, but she looked so sure that she would be the one to win.

Wang Ba left angrily.

Mak and Hong Shan rushed up to He Yan. The rest gradually dispersed. Occasionally, a few of them watched He Yan with a complex expression of admiration and sympathy.

They probably all agreed that He Yan would become a guerilla soldier.

Liang Ping glanced at He Yan, shook his head, and left while sighing as he walked. Young people were just impulsive and did not consider the consequences, but… why was he still a little excited when he thought about it?

……………

Within half a day, the entire Liang Zhou Wei knew about this bet between Wo Yan and Wang Ba.

People in the barracks started to make bets themselves, but all of them had little money. They were so poor that they used the dry bread distributed in the barracks to make bets. If Wang Ba loses, one would lose ten, and if He Yan loses, one would lose two.

In the past few days, there were a lot fewer people who ate dry bread. After all, it was not easy to find something fun to do with training all day long.

Cheng Li Su walked into the room and changed into a brand-new yellow robe with a red koi embroidered on the corners of the robe, which was vivid and lovely. As soon as he came in, he yelled at the young man who sat at the table, “Uncle, do you know that the barracks are talking about the crossbow agreement ten days from now?”

Xiao Jue didn’t look away from the book. “I know.”

The entire barracks knew that there was a weak boy who wanted to be the boss of the bandits and a good archer who wanted to drive the opponent to become a guerilla soldier. What a strange pair.

“Now people are even placing bets on them, and I plan to place bets as well, are you coming?” Cheng Li Su squeezed in front of Xiao Jue and asked him cheerfully.

“Cheng Li Su,” Xiao Jue put down the book in his hand and looked at him calmly, “Are you going to gamble in the barracks?”

It was clearly a flat tone, but Cheng Li Su shuddered. He hurriedly raised his hands up. “No, no, not me. It was made by someone else, and I don’t want to bet money. At most a few dry loaves of breads, to pass the time and have fun! Uncle, I’m still a child, and it’s normal to play peaches and shoot willows![2]”

Xiao Jue hummed, “Playing things will lose one’s will.”

“I don’t have ambitions in the first place, so what can I lose?” Cheng Li Su answered confidently.

 Xiao Jue couldn’t answer this.

“Uncle, if you don’t want to go, I will bet by myself. If I don’t have dry bread, I will bet with them with my jerky. It’s not too much money.” He said cheerfully and started to walk out.

“Who are you betting on?” He heard Xiao Jue’s voice as soon as he walked to the door.

As Xiao Jue has always been uninterested in these things, Cheng Li Su was surprised for a moment, but still answered obediently, “Of course it is the king! Isn’t that Brother He Yan as useless as I am?”

 Xiao Jue twitched the corner of his mouth, “I advise you to change your bargaining chip.”

 “Huh?”

“Don’t underestimate an idiot who works hard,” the young man looked down. As if he recalled someone, his long eyes looked like autumn water making ripples, “The last idiot I had seen, became a third-rank military commander.”

[1] an ignorant youth

[2] playing peach: playing ball, because it is spherical like a peach;

      shooting willow: shooting willow branches with an arrow. It was originally a martial arts  competition often held in the Liao and Jin dynasties. Later refers to playing games.

# Chapter 48: **TRAINING HARD**

Since the first day of the bet between He Yan and Wang Ba, the barracks followed suit in private.

The people who weren’t present when He Yan drew the bow deliberately sneaked a look to see if He Yan had improved before going to bed at night. He Yan remembered that the last time she was so noticeable was when General Fei Hong was rewarded by the court for his victory.

Although the situation was quite different now, she was still well known.

“Those people are too much!” Mak returned from the outside, dissatisfied, “I heard that people who bet on Brother He could be counted with one hand. It’s like they are sure that Brother He won’t win!”

“This is just a normal choice for people.” Hong Shan said while he supported his forehead.

Originally, the recruits have been unable to do anything except drills every day. But, thanks to He Yan, once this happened, there was a lot of fun and laughter everywhere, as if they came to the city of Beijing.

“My eldest brother and I are also going to join in the fun, so to give Brother He a little momentum, we also betted on Brother He.” Mak looked at He Yan, pleased, and said, “Brother He, aren’t we very loyal?”

Before He Yan had time to speak, Hong Shan asked first. “How many loaves of bread did you bet on?”

“One piece for me and my big brother.”

“One piece—” Hong Shan deliberately lengthened his voice, “Then how much did you bet for the king?”

“Ten pieces,” Mak answered without even thinking about it. After he recovered and met He Yan’s gaze, he blushed and stammered, “No, no, we thought of winning a few more pieces of bread so that we could share it together. If Brother He loses, we won’t be… able to fill our stomachs…” The more he talked, the lower his voice became, and finally, he didn’t dare to speak as he looked at He Yan pitifully.

He Yan was surprised, “Where did you get the ten dry loaves of bread?”

Wouldn’t one only be to save a single piece a day?

“On credit…”

He Yan was amazed at the fact that they could still use credit and thought that it was still a big gambling game, not just a small mess.

She spoke earnestly to Mak, “Mak, you’d better quickly withdraw the king’s bet, ten pieces of dry bread. If you plan to starve for ten days, would you be able to endure it?”

Hong Shan had a headache: “Bother He, you have to be reasonable, now is not the time to get angry.”

He Yan, “…What should I say so that you guys will believe that I am not angry?”

How they refused to believe it was almost written on their faces.

He Yan had no choice but to stand up and say, “Then I will go out to practice first,” as she left the room.

“Huh.” Mak sighed sadly.

“Huh.” Hong Shan joined him.

 Shi watched them silently without a sound, and then quietly sighed as well.

A gloomy cloud floated in the room.

    …

This bet with Wang Ba was only the beginning of He Yan’s fame.

These days, people could hear He Yan’s name wherever they went.

“Have you heard? The recruit named He Yan under Instructor Liang is crazy!”

“I know, the one who bet with Wang Ba that he’d compete with the crossbow in ten days, isn’t he crazy for betting?”

“He’s even crazier now, and instead of practicing his crossbow properly during the day, he’s throwing stone locks! He doesn’t even try to shoot the arrows.”

“Then he must be insane.”

He Yan threw stone locks in the open space. When everyone trained with the crossbow during the daytime, many people watched her, as she simply stopped practicing the crossbow. She even asked the instructor to borrow a big stone lock and started to throw it for fun, as if she didn’t have anything to do.

She had to increase her strength.

To make the best use of the crossbow, of course, she needed enough strength to draw the bow to its full extent. In the past, when she was in the barracks, there was a man under her command who used to be a street performer. He learned to play with the stone lock since he was a child and was able to play with them in a variety of ways, such as catching lotus leaves, fanning beams, chopping, fighting, covering the roof with snowflakes, and taking off the robe of the God of Guan.

That same man was also an excellent archer. Not only did he have a good aim, but other people couldn’t even draw the bow as full as he could. And unlike anyone else, he could fully use the power of the crossbow. He Yan once practiced arm strength together with him. The two of them threw stone locks at each other while they moved around and dodged them. This method resulted in the development of their arm strength, wrist strength, hand strength, and waist strength.

But now, no one was there to throw against her. She wanted to practice her arm strength first, so that she would be able to draw the bow to its full extent.

Practicing stone locks was a much faster method in order to grow in strength than drawing a bow. In the daytime, He Yan threw stone locks, and at night, after everyone was asleep, she sneaked to the practice field. Fortunately, there were always one or two bows left in the practice field, which allowed her to practice secretly. Since the last time she saw Xiao Jue, she came back at night and did not continue to encounter him.

Although she was not afraid of the presence of Xiao Jue, whenever he noticed that she practiced secretly at night, she always felt a vague embarrassment. It made her look back to the time when she was clumsy and had to work hard every night before she could sprint to “third from the bottom”.

This was probably the humiliation of the despisement by the proud son of heaven!

She had already gotten rid of this humiliation, but who knew that God, by mistake, would make her feel it all over again.

How can she make God take her more seriously?

She practiced daily, and it was these brothers around her who understood the least.

“Brother He,” Hong Shan hesitated, “No matter how well you draw the bow, you can’t beat the king.”

“Yes, I’ve been keeping an eye out for Wang Ba for you every day, he can hit the center of the target every time, and he barely ever missed.” Mak followed.

“Wang Ba is a good archer,” He Yan said, “He should be good at hurting people with bows and arrows. It seems that he’s even more skilled than Shi.”

Shi nodded. After a look at He Yan’s opponent’s skill, he had to admit that he himself was no match.

“Then Brother He, why don’t you practice arrows every day?” Mak was even more puzzled. “You should shoot a few times at least and practice your aim a few times as well. What if the feather arrows fly into the woods?”

“No need.” He Yan said.

Mak stared at him, “Could it be…”

Did He Yan have any secret magic weapon?

He Yan laughed. She didn’t have any secret magic weapon. She just used the time when other people slept to practice arrows. She drew her bow daily and shot arrows under the moonlight, and day by day, the bow was drawn better, which was very effective, and the accuracy of archery did not regress. It was a blessing in misfortune.

“I just have a terrible aptitude compared to a normal person.” She thought about it for a while and said seriously, “But I am very lucky. You have to believe that even if I don’t practice arrows, as long as I can draw the bow open and full when the time comes, the arrow will fly to the target by itself like it has eyes.”

Everyone looked at He Yan who smiled, and the same thought flashed through their minds.

He Yan really was crazy.

# Chapter 49: **THE TENTH DAY**

Ten days passed overnight.

All of the Liang Zhou guards looked forward to the lively gambling game. Most people bet that Wang Ba will win, while a small number of people supported He Yan’s side. Occasionally, when people pass by, they could hear the people who supported He Yan argue with the other side, “What’s wrong with He Yan? To do something he knows he can’t, he’s truly a great man!”

Accidently, He Yan also heard it.

However, no matter what they say, the bets were the best way to see what people truly desired. The number of loaves of bread betted on He Yan’s win were only three, one from each Mak, Shi, and Hongshan.

In addition, to He Yan’s surprise, an unknown person actually betted on He Yan’s win with ten pieces of beef jerky.

“Who is such a generous person?” Mak thought hard, “He has bet so many treasures on Brother He,so he must be very wealthy.”

“Not only wealthy but also very discerning.” *Finally, a wise man in the barracks,*He Yan thought.

Hong Shan glanced at He Yan, “It’s a pity that his brain is broken.”

“Brother Shan, you can’t say that. This person must appreciate Brother He so he secretly supported him. If I had this much jerky, I would have also bet on Brother He.”

“It’s only a small bet, don’t be so serious.” He Yan poured the water in the jug and stood up, “I’ll go to the practice field later, so get up and move around first.”

 Shi asked, “Are you really up to it?” His eyes were full of doubt.

“As I’ve said, I’ve had good luck every time.” He Yan smiled.

When she arrived at the practice field, she found that it was already surrounded by a few people. Someone saw her coming  and shouted, “He Yan is here!” Suddenly, a large crowd of people rushed over.

“Where is he? Where is he?”

“He really didn’t run away, he really came!”

 “Quickly, are you all ready with your dry loaves of bread?”

 He Yan, “…”

This kind of starry-eyed treatment, really made one a little uncomfortable. Instructor Liang looked at him coldly. Originally, private gambling in the barracks was strictly forbidden, but because they used dry cakes– and it was such a unique situation– that even the chief Instructor did not intend to stop. So, Liang Ping did not add any more beaks1. Besides, he himself was enthusiastic and wanted to follow along to see what the result was.

After all, people are more or less good gamblers in their blood.

He Yan just walked over and saw a young man who wore licorice yellow clothes and stood next to Liang Ping. The young man had red lips and white teeth, and he looked very familiar. He Yan felt that she had probably seen him somewhere, so she looked over at him.

Seeing that she looked over him, the young man showed a big smile, walked over, and enthusiastically said, “So you are He Yan!”

 Has this person also come to see her specially? However, as she looked at the young man’s clothes, he did not look like a recruit in the barracks, much less like an Instructor, and he was no different from the children of the noble family of the capital.

“I have heard about you a long ago, and I admire you very much! I’d like to worship you so we will be brothers from now on. How about it?”

He Yan was baffled. This person came up and worshipped her to become her brother. She still didn’t know what his name or surname was.

Instructor Liang stepped forward and smiled at the yellow-clothed boy, “Master Cheng, the governor wants you to stay away from the crossbow.”

 Xiao Jue? He Yan suddenly remembered where she had seen this boy. She was in the academy yard with He Yun Sheng and secretly tried to teach Young Master Zhao a lesson, which made him angry and he turned his anger to his horse. He wanted to kill the horse in the streets, but was stopped by Xiao Jue. At that time, it was this guy who walked alongside Xiao Jue. The little master with a rare stature.

 Huh? Did he follow Xiao Jue to Liang Zhou?

“Uncle is just too much, what does it matter? It’s not like the arrows are going to hit me.” The boy muttered a few words and obediently stepped back.

Uncle? He Yan was even more surprised. Is this boy Xiao Jue’s nephew? But the Xiao family has only two sons and no other daughters, so what kind of relationship was it?

 Before He Yan could think clearly, she heard a familiar voice, “You are here!”

It was Wang Ba.

Hehad also made full preparations for today. He had already taken off his red shirt. He only wore a red coat, shirtless, with a long red belt tied to his forehead, as if he was about to fight in the ring.

His voice was very loud, and she heard that the brothers in the tent last night gave him all the food so he could fight with his full energy today.

He walked over to the crossbow, stood with He Yan, and looked at her provocatively, “Ten days have passed, the time for you to fulfill the agreement has arrived.”

“I remember, you don’t have to say it so loudly.” He Yan pulled on her ears, “You first.”

Wang Ba snorted, approached He Yan, and said in a low voice, “You still have time to beg for mercy?”

“That is exactly what I want to say to you.” He Yan replied unhurriedly.

 “I think you are looking for death!” Wang Ba sneered and stepped forward., “He Yan doesn’t dare to go first, so I’ll go instead!”

Whispers filled the crowd. He Yan shrugged and stood aside. Hong Shan asked him in a low voice, “Ah He, are you nervous?”

“I’m not nervous.” He Yan felt helpless, patted Hong Shan, who was nervous one. “There’s no need for you to be scared anymore.”

“I’m afraid he’ll play too well…”

In fact, Wang Ba performed very well every day, but in her mind, there was no such thing as “too good”. He took one step forward and set up the crossbow, fingers clasped with arrows. Because of this bet with He Yan, Wang Ba practiced bow more diligently every day, and He Yan could feel that his strength had improved compared to ten days ago, and his archery felt calmer than before.

The arrow aimed at the direction of the grass target. The sun was covered by clouds, and it gave a brief breeze. Wang Ba took a deep breath and suddenly released his fingers.

In everyone’s sight, the arrow hit the bullseye firmly and brought the target down.

The result was very stable, and as fruitful as Wang Ba’s daily archery training, it was not easy to maintain such archery skills.

A glimmer of satisfaction flashed in Liang Ping’s eyes. No matter what the result today would be, Wang Ba was an excellent seedling. Such a person should be taken seriously even under other instructors.

Wang Ba clapped his hands, put the crossbow back, walked to He Yan’s side, with a triumphant smile. “How about it, it’s your turn now?”

He Yan smiled and turned around.

“Here it comes!” Cheng Li Su craned his neck excitedly and muttered to himself in a low voice, “Brother He Yan, I put ten pieces of jerky on you. Although it’s not a big deal, it’s a piece of the young master’s heart. Don’t let me down!”

He Yan didn’t know that she still carried Cheng Li Su’s ten pieces of jerky. From the moment she walked to the side of the crossbow, the chattering stopped, and all eyes fell on her.

This kid, did he just talk big? Or did he really have the skills?

However, there were too few things in the world that could be considered miracles. Except for a few people who expect miracles to happen, most people were just there to watch for jokes.

He Yan picked up the crossbow.

1He didn’t want to stop it.

# Chapter 50: **THE DRAW**

From ten days ago, the weapons were the same, and so were the archers, but somehow, the atmosphere felt different.

The teenager pulled away the smile on her face and placed her fingers on the arrow, her gaze straight to the center of the straw target. The clouds dispersed to let the blazing sun shine on her face. A drop of sweat slowly rolled down her forehead.

Beads of sweat almost rolled into her eyes, and made the people nervous for no reason, and even more wanted to reach out and brush the drops of sweat away. But the young man remained motionless, like a stone statue, without any sensation. His eyes didn’t waver at all.

The bow was slowly pulled apart, partly, then in half, until it was full. The hearts of the crowd also lifted, and when they were about to suspect that the bow was going to be pulled off in the next moment, the young man stopped his hand, unprepared, and let go of the hand that held the arrow.

The arrow was like a shooting star that pierced the night sky, and with a gust of wind, it rushed rampantly towards the straw target, and it  fell down with a *bang!* And this time, the arrow target was brought even farther down, making one not able to see the arrow clearly.

She had shot the arrow target down, as had Wang Ba.

Someone screamed out in shock.

Eleven days ago, He Yan stood here, unable to even pull her bow, and ten days ago, though He Yan pulled her bow, it was but a small part here. Now her bow was perfectly drawn, and she even shot the target down. Her strength improved considerably in these ten days.

But He Yan wasn’t a prodigy, so how could something like strength grow with the wind?

“Brother He is awesome!” Mak called up, laughed and jumped, “Brother He won!”

“What win?” A recruit who had bet on Wang Ba — distressed about his dry piece of bread– was unconvinced, “Just because he hit the target doesn’t mean he hit the center of the arrow, and if he doesn’t,it means he lost!”

He reminded the audience that this was not a show to see how well He Yan could pull the bow. He was too thin and weak, but they were so surprised by the growth of his arm strength that they forgot to look at his accuracy.

“I’ll go check!” Someone volunteered to run to the target.

Wang Ba looked at He Yan, the teenager stood against the blazing sun with lips full of smiles… *it’s this smile again*. From the beginning when he met him he was like this, he didn’t seem not worried at all, always so ready to teach people with obnoxious confidence.

But… Wang Ba looked at his own hand, why was he even a little shaken?

He was an orphan with no father or mother, taken by wolves when he was a child. When someone rescued him from the wolf’s den, he was still on the mother wolf for milk. He had been a bandit for many years, and countless birds and animals had died under his arrow. He could shoot well because he had touched the bow since he was seven years old, and now, it’s been more than twenty years.

This little kid was only fifteen or sixteen. Even if he had touched a bow when he was young, it would only be a dozen years, so how could he be as good as him? What’s more, ten days ago, it didn’t look like He Yan pretended when he couldn’t draw a bow, so it couldn’t that a familiar hand had played with a crossbow since childhood.

Thinking, Wang Ba steadied his nerves and soothed his faintly restless heart: He Yan must be no match for him.

The man who had taken the initiative to look for the target arrived. First, he lowered his head to look at the target, and did not reply for a long while. Then, he suddenly crouched down, picked up the arrow target, and ran back.

The arrow target, which was just a straw man, was carried easily, and he quickly ran forward and flung the target to the ground, and said loudly, “Everyone see for yourself!”

Wang Ba’s heart thudded violently.

 Everyone looked towards the straw man, but they saw that the center of the straw man was pierced through to the end by a feathered arrow, steadily and impartially, right in the heart.

It was exactly the same as Wang Ba’s.

Sweat ran down Wang Ba’s forehead. The shocked discussion of the surrounding people seemed to fade away, and he saw Liang Ping staring at He Yan in amazement, and the brocaded young gentleman beside Liang Ping was also filled with joy. He Yan stood beside his friend, but he didn’t look much surprised, just smiling lightly as if he had already expected everything.

“You…”

He Yan smiled, “Accepted.”

“You didn’t win against me.” Wang Ba threw him a deadly stare, “You and I have the same result, how can you be considered to win over me, at most… at most it’s a draw.”

As they both shot the grass target down and also shot the grass target right in the middle, it was really hard to tell a winner from a loser. For Wang Ba, such a result was expected. But He Yan was different, he just went from loser to impressive.

After she heard Wang Ba’s words, He Yan wasn’t exasperated, so she didn’t even argue with Wang Ba, but nodded her head and said, “I think so too.”

In Wang Ba’s heart, he was actually relieved. It would be good to acknowledge the draw, at least… at least he didn’t lose. Those recruits also wiped the sweat from their foreheads. Who would have thought that in the end He Yan would hit the target? If it wasn’t a draw, they would have lost their dry breads in vain. A draw was good, a draw was just right, no one would lose or win, and they were entitled to watch a different kind of fun.

In the next moment, the celebration in the hearts of the crowd was shattered by the words of He Yan.

She just took a pause and said, “I made a bet with you on that day that I will win today. Now that the winner is yet to be decided, it’s natural that we will compete until I win over you.”

“He Yan!” Wang Ba gritted his teeth. What does that mean? Was he certain that he would win? What was this kid saying? What does he want?

Liang Ping also stared at He Yan unexpectedly.

“For the crossbow, you can propose a contest as you like, and I will accompany you until I win, how about it?” A smirk crept up on her face.

“Aren’t you thinking too highly of yourself?” Wang Ba stared at her coldly.

“I don’t think too highly of myself, I just believe in my luck.” She blew her shredded hair on her forehead with little concern, “You know, luck favors those who are prepared.” And she, all the time, was prepared.

“Is that what you’re saying, a casual crossbow competition?” Wang Ba slowly asked back.

“A thousand times true.”

“Fine.” The scarred man nodded, took his huge crossbow, and started to walk off the stage,  turning his back to her, “What’s the point of shooting a dead straw target? On the battlefield, the enemy won’t stand still and wait for you to shoot. If you really want to shoot an arrow, shoot at a living thing, and the birds and beasts are just in time for practice.”

It turned out the challenge was to become a predator.

The crowd stood dumbfounded. To shoot at living things was much harder than shooting at a target. As the old saying goes, “A hundred steps to pierce the Yang,”[1] and a straw target was not as agile as a living thing.

“Brother He, you can’t fall for his trap, don’t promise him!” Hong Shan hurriedly gave He Yan a straight look.

When He Yan looked at Wang Ba, her eyes flashed with admiration, and she nodded, her voice cheerful.

 “Okay.”

[1] pierce a willow leaf with an arrow from the distance of a hundred paces; hit the target at every shot; One can hit virtually any target within a hundred steps.

# Chapter 51: **TIED AGAIN**

He agreed to it.

Liang Ping, who had remained silent, was now looking at He Yan in a very different light. Having experienced the previous times, he knew that this young man wouldn’t be speaking empty words, and since he had agreed, he should at least be confident.

He could shoot living things?

“If you want to shoot wild animals, we have to go into the woods,” said Wang Ba. The forest was on Baiyue Mountain, he looked towards Liang Ping, who withdrew himself from his thoughts and shook his head, “No.”

Wang Ba and He Yan were both new recruits, they had never been to Baiyue Mountain, therefore were not familiar with the road. The new recruits would have to wait for some time to enter the mountain, but the time was not now. He said, “Let’s use the flying bird as a target.”

Flying birds… the recruits were shocked again. Simply said, catching wild animals was more difficult than shooting a straw target, but flying birds were definitely more difficult of a target than wild animals. People were located on the ground, whereas birds in the sky, the natural distances were different. And shooting arrows from the ground to the sky required greater aim and arm strength.

Wang Ba let out a loud laugh, “Sure!”

He Yan also smiled and said, “No problem.”

They both agreed so lightly, but it made the recruits, who had calmed down just now, excited again. It seemed that Wang Ba was often up in the mountains shooting birds and wolves but what about He Yan?

Mak quietly tugged on the corner of Shi’s clothes, “Brother, do you think Brother He can win?”

“I don’t know,” Shi replied.

Mak looked at his big brother in surprise. Even Shi couldn’’t even deny it outright. Did that mean that He Yan could actually shoot?

“You guys go get the bows.” Liang Ping said and turned to take care of another recruit who didn’t know what to do. That new soldier listened to instructor Liang, who instructed a few words, turned around and went to the shelf in the arena to find a gong. He took the gong and ran to the forest not far away.

A few moments later, with a “boom” sound, he struck the gong fiercely, only to hear a “fluttering” sound, stirring up countless wild birds.

Baiyue mountain was a densely-covered with jungle, and there were many wild birds. He Yan saw White-bellied Blue Swallows and a Green Pearl Sparrows, as they flew into the sky quickly. The wild birds quickly flew into the sky, and in a split second, Wang Ba immediately set up his bow and shot arrows and his movements were skillful and relaxed. He had an aspirational ease as if he was determined to win.

The arrow flew towards the sky, only to see the birds in the flock that were spreading their wings, hit by something, sinking downwards. In the arena, the screams of men rang out. “Shot! Shot!” The recruit picked up an arrow on the ground with a squeaky red on it.

This was Wang Ba’s prey.

Wang Ba looked proudly at He Yan.

He Yan smiled, and calmly drew her bow and pointed it at the sky, her movements were faster than Wang Ba’s, so fast that one wondered if she was actually aiming at her prey, yet the arrow had already flown out. The sunlight was so great that it blurred one’s vision, making it impossible to distinguish the direction of the arrow for an instant.

Shi looked unblinkingly at the sky and said after a while, “It hit.”

“Really?” Hong Shan looked with suspicion, “Why can’t I see?”

In a corner of the arena, another voice rang out, “I’ve picked up He Yan’s arrow! Here!” He ran up to Liang Ping with the arrow, “Here!”

There was a willow string hanging from the arrow

Liang Ping and Wang Ba looked at He Yan at the same time.

The former was abruptly surprised to discover that the man in front of him was a treasure, while the latter was full of disbelief.

How did he do it?

Wang Ba tightened his grip on his bow and said, “Again!” He yelled at the gong-beating recruit, “Go on!”

The new recruit struck the gong several times, and from the woods, a large flock of birds immediately flew out. Wang Ba placed several arrows in his hands and fired them at the same time!

A few arrows rushed into the sky together, but it was hard to tell if they hit or not, but a few moments later, someone in the arena shouted, “Bingo! I have the arrow!”

A hundred shots, a hundred bull’s eyes[1], Wang Ba was already one in a hundred, no, it could be said that he is one in a thousand. What about He Yan?

Everyone then looked at He Yan, who was smiling slightly and also followed Wang Ba’s example, putting a few arrows on the bow together.

The bow was drawn to it’s full, and the youngster’s face held a relaxed smile as if she was going to the Sishui river for an outing, casually playing with the art of shooting at will.

She drew the bow.

Arrows also rushed into the flock of birds, birds panicked and dodged, someone in the arena shouted, “Hit, hit, hit! I picked up the arrow!”

Being able to bring the arrow in front of the instructor was also worthy of success.

“You!” Wang Ba gritted his teeth and turned around to carry the arrow quiver, “I don’t believe you’ll be lucky everytime!” He set up his bow and shot arrows nonstop, actually trying to shoot all the arrows in the quiver.

Each quiver contained twenty arrows, having differently colored arrow feathers, making it easier for the new recruits to distinguish them when practicing. Wang Ba took the red arrow feathers, and He Yan picked out the green ones. She also followed Wang Ba’s example, shooting arrows non-stop.

For a while, neither of them spoke, they could only hear the constant clanging of the gong in the woods and the frightened sparrows flying in the sky.

“It’s so good! It’s so much fun!” Cheng Lisu’s eyes widened at the sight, grabbing Liang Ping’s arm and praising, “This is much more interesting than the hunting grounds in the capital! Instructor Liang, why are your soldiers so interesting? How did you find such talents?”

Liang Ping smiled, he was also at a loss, he didn’t know either! Wang Ba was already a surprise, and now there was He Yan too and Liang Ping simply wondered if he was dreaming.

Twenty arrows were used up in an instant.

The new recruits on the arena were also enthusiastic, gathering up the fallen arrows and bringing them to Instructor Liang. Twenty red arrows, and twenty green arrows, no arrow was shot in vain.

Among the new recruits of the Liang Zhou, there were two such divine archers who shot stones and drank feathers[2]. Liang Ping thought that he was about to be promoted, and even if he wasn’t, at least, the monthly payment would go up.

“I didn’t expect Brother He to be so good…,” Mak had been stunned and was muttering to himself.

“I didn’t expect it either,” Hong Shan hadn’t returned to his senses, “It’s good that I bet on He Yan to win…”

Right oh, the bet wasn’t over yet. Hong Shan’s words were like a reminder to the crowd, and a new recruit suddenly yelled, “This… is a draw! Didn’t He Yan and Wang Ba get the same result? Then how is this round calculated?”

Yeah, how does this count?

Wang Ba lowered his head, no one knew what he was thinking, after a moment, he raised his head, his face cloudy, “You didn’t win.”

“Yes,” He Yan didn’t deny it, she even genuinely praised her opponent, “It’s your archery skill that’s too good, I’m overstating it.”

“Then even if it’s a draw, you still didn’t win against me today.” Wang Ba said in a domineering tone. The matter had come to this, he was also a little panicked. In reality, the fact that He Yan was able to keep up with his pace meant that his and He Yan’s skill were comparable.

He couldn’t find any other way to outsmart He Yan.

“Ten days ago, I said that after ten days, I would defeat you. How can we make peace now that the winner is still undecided?” He Yan fanned wind with her hand, “If you can’t think of a way to compete, how about I mention one?”

[1] Shoot target a hundred times without a single miss, hit one’s mark every single time and never miss

[2] The arrow hit the stone, concealing the feathers of the arrow tail which means the arrow was extremely powerful and could also be used to describe martial arts high strength.

# Chapter 52: **THE NEW COMPETITION**

Is she going to have a crossbow competition again?

Instructor Liang looked at her inquisitively. Cheng Lisu whispered, “Instructor Liang, is there anything comparable in this crossbow competition?”

Instructor Liang shook his head, “I don’t know about this…” Her crossbow skills were actually comparable to quite a few, but it was most similar to Wang Ba’s.The rest was not difficult to imagine. But the meaning of her words was that she was set to outshine Wang Ba undoubtedly. Still, was there something that Wang Ba could not do that she alone could?

Wang Ba was startled at first, then said disapprovingly, “Go ahead and mention it!”

It would not be a big deal, just one more draw, he thought.

He Yan smiled slightly as she walked over to Cheng Lisu and suddenly reached out, pulling off Cheng lisu’s long hair band.

Cheng Lisu was dumbfounded, and when he reacted, his long hair was already down, and he said, “What are you doing?”

“I’m sorry, this brother,” He Yan smiled, “Since you were going to worship me, I guess you wouldn’t be stingy with a hairband, so I want to lend it once.”

“But it’s…” Cheng Lisu haphazardly gathered his hair with hands and whispered, “This is too sudden. Besides, why don’t you use your own hairband?” Obviously He Yan had her own set of goods.

“I think that this brother’s hairband is much more exquisite than mine. Maybe it’s tainted with good luck, and will lend me some of it.” He Yan said without changing her face.

Who didn’t like to hear nice words? Cheng Lisu immediately opened his eyes wide and smiled, saying, “Well said! You just use it!”

The crowd didn’t understand what he was going to do with Cheng Lisu’s hairband, only to see He Yan slowly wrapping it around his hands, and covering her eyes.

“He is… this” the crowd gradually understood what he was doing.

The yellow hair band blindfolded her eyes tightly, and she reached behind her head and tied a knot gently before saying, “Alright.”

Speaking of which, He Yan didn’t use her own headband and the next person’s hairband, as it was really a hot day. They were running and practicing their bows, and were already drenched in sweat. The people in the barracks were not refined, and their hairbands were somewhat stained. But Xiao Jue’s nephew was different.The clothes he wore were brand new with a fragrance, and his hairband was as clean as new, just like his uncle who was addicted to cleanliness. so she thought it was better to use the cleaner one.

Maybe it was cleaner than He Yan’s own clothes. At this moment, when she tied the hair band, she thought that it was unexpected that it carried a touch of rosin.

What a fastidious young master, He Yan sighed in her heart thinking that he was really his Uncle’s nephew.

“He Yan, what are you doing?” Wang Ba frowned and asked. He had a guess in his heart, but he didn’t dare admit it.

“Let’s compare blindfolded archery.” She said.

The arena gradually quieted down, and the summer day coincided with a wind blowing through, blowing the long end of the hair band at the back of her head, so it appeared that the barely clothed youth was elegant since birth. The corner of her lips also contained a smile. She held a longbow, towards Wang Ba’s direction and said, “This game, I will defeat you.”

The words were spoken by her in a cloudy and decisive manner, as if she had already predicted the end.

Wang Ba’s face turned green and white and changed a few times, not waiting for him to speak, someone spoke before him, his tone filled with suspicion, “Shooting arrows blindfolded. But shooting what? Straw targets?”

He Yan shook her head and raised her head slightly, she was blindfolded and supposedly couldn’t see the sky, but the way she looked up, it was as if she could spy the birds flying through the air. She said, “Same as just now, we’ll hunt the birds.”

The crowd was in an uproar.

She looked so conceited, but was she really conceited?

He Yan turned to face Wang Ba’s direction again, and asked with a smile, “Is it okay?”

Okay? The words, like the first time when she was asked by Instructor Liang, she quickly answered “Yes”. Now, the word “Yes” was on the tip of his tongue, but Wang Ba couldn’t say it.

Whether he was a bandit or a hunter, he always had a purpose. Blindfolded archery? He wasn’t blind, it was pointless for him to do this kind of thing, and he wasn’t even the son of a rich family, it was a novelty to play. Even if he was very confident in his crossbow skills, then this contest method proposed by He Yan was the one he was least confident in.

He simply couldn’t do it.

Wang Ba looked at He Yan, who didn’t urge him to hurry up and give him an answer. But the new recruits around him were also looking at him with all kinds of eyes, making it difficult for Wang Ba to ride the tiger himself[1]. Was he going to be here today, in the full view of the public, being swept off his face by a yellow-haired kid[2]? He was the head of a mountain bandit gang and he dared not even answer the words of a child.

 “Fine!” He gritted his teeth. But in his heart, a slight fluke arose, maybe He Yan was deceiving him. this kid had always been cunning and evil, maybe he himself was not good enough and just deliberately made an appearance of being extremely confident, just to swindle him.

Tie, he won’t be fooled!

“This game, you first!” Wang Ba rushed at him.

The teenager smiled again, her posture light, nodded and said, “Okay.”

……

Next to the arena’s stage, there was a loft, which was next to the Liang Zhou guardhouse, and was high enough to get a good view of the arena.

There were two people standing in front of the railing of the loft, watching from afar the youngsters who were surrounded by new recruits in the center.

One wore a red-colored strong suit, and a black cloth belt around his waist. It was Shen Han. The youth beside him was cold like ice and snow, with an indifferent look, and he was none other than Xiao Jue.

“I didn’t expect such two good seedlings to come out of this batch of soldiers this time.” Shen Han exclaimed, “Needless to say, that Wang Ba is from a bandit background and is untamed, but his crossbow technique is indeed very clever and infinitely powerful. But the most surprising thing is that young man called He Yan, he is only fifteen or sixteen years old now, and he is already so outstanding, gentle and likeable. So when he grows up, after a few more years, he would definitely become the best of this group of new recruits.”

He thought of his previous conversation with Liang Ping, at that time Liang Ping was very optimistic about He Yan, but Shen Han didn’t take it to heart. It was because he saw He Yan’s qualifications as excessively ordinary and not worth paying attention to, yet he didn’t expect to almost miss a good seedling.

When he saw that Xiao Jue didn’t answer, he cautiously probed, “What does the General think?”

“Gentle temperament?” The youth repeated slowly, and only after a moment did he absently say, “I’m afraid you’ve missed the point. The one who is untamed is not Wang Ba, it is He Yan.”

He Yan? Shen Han was a little skeptical. He had seen that teenager a few times, always with a smile on his face. Wang Ba had provoked him several times, but he hadn’t seen He Yan a least bit annoyed. To be honest, children at this age were just righteous and violent, and they would fight when they didn’t agree, but He Yan was cultured and very gentle.

The General actually said that He Yan was untamed? For the first time, Shen Han had some doubts about this superior’s vision.

“Then…” Shen Han changed his words, “Does the General think that He Yan can win this game?”

The young man raised the corner of his lips, his voice faint.

 “He can.”

[1]  get into a position from which there is no retiring  
[2]a naive or foolish child.

# Chapter 53: **LET’S HEAR HIM CALL ‘BOSS’**

In the arena, He Yan had slowly set up her bow.

The person being blindfolded, couldn’t see the prey. Hence, they had to rely on their hearing skills to locate the prey.

And there’s nothing better than the power of a blind man to hear anything in the world.

During her time as a blind person, she was decadent. How could a blind person be one of the most outstanding people if he walked into this world with a lot of inconveniences and couldn’t even take care of himself? She had always worked hard, as she had mediocre aptitude so she had to make up for it with diligence, but that day was catastrophic, and all her efforts were taken back in an instant. Even the “mediocre” qualifications became a delusion and turned to ashes.

She remembered the time when she was not reconciled to despair and someone had told her, “If you truly want to be strong, there is no harm in being blind. Even if you are blind, you can be the most different one among the blind.”

It really wasn’t a very good consolation, but it was magically taken to her heart. She fumbled with the practice by not having to use her eyes to do things. However, she often thought about this phrase “to be the most different one among the blind”.

She didn’t know if she was the “most” different one, but she was different from other blind people. She could take care of herself and even others, practice sword fighting and roll dice behind her servants’ back, and also be naughty, hiding a child’s slingshot and shooting birds in secret.

Her life as a blind person, compared to other blind people, wasn’t too bad.

Since she could do what she was able to do when she was blind, there was no need to mention it in the present. She was merely for the time being, returning to that time in the past.

The sound of the gong in the forest stirred up countless birds, and the silhouettes of birds were reflected in the sky. The young man smiled with his eyes covered, set up his bow, and shot an arrow that followed the bird’s trail and flew straight up to the clouds!

A bird chirped and was hit by an arrow, falling sharply. The green feathered arrow reflected the yellow cloth between the youth’s eyes, which was bright and colorful.

He Yan reached out, removing the blindfold. She didn’t even take a second glance at the arrow on the ground, as if she had already expected to hit her prey. Handing the cloth to Wang Ba, while smiling she said, “It’s your turn.”

The surroundings were silent, and Wang Ba did not reach out to receive the ribbon she handed over.

He Yan remained motionless for a long while AND Wang Ba slumped down. He didn’t look at He Yan, he just whispered, “No, I won’t, you’re amazing, I’m not as good as you.”

The words reflected his half anger, half sincere conviction. He was angry that he had lost to He Yan and lost face, but he was sincerely convinced that He Yan knew blindfolded archery, which he really didn’t know how to do. Even if he had started to practice he would not necessarily be better than He Yan in the future.

People had to admit their own shortcomings.

The new recruits finally came back to their senses, but they didn’t cluster and cheer. At first, a voice wailed, “My dry bread, my dry bread lost! How miserable!”

Another voice said, “I’m even worse, I had ten on credit and they’re all gone!”

Immediately afterward, there were wailing voices one after another, and it was as if the great Liang Zhou hadn’t won the dry bread by casting He Yan into the gambling game. Even though they had the support of Mak and the other three dry cakes, the win or loss was in vain.

But at this moment, a joyful voice rang out, “Ah! I won! I voted for ten pieces of jerky, haha. I told you that I, Cheng LiSu, have always had a good eye for people!”

He Yan was about to leave and was stunned at the news, looking back at Cheng Lisu, she was not expecting that the one who threw in ten pieces of jerky was actually Cheng Lisu. But on second thought, if it wasn’t Cheng Lisu, who else in Liang zhou would be so generous? Xiao Jue? It was strange that Xiao Jue would participate in such a bet.

Cheng Lisu ran to He Yan’s side in a flash, looking at He Yan with bright eyes, “Well, brother He Yan, thanks to you, I finally won a round. You don’t know, I’m not good at anything in the capital, I’m neither good at literature, nor at martial arts, I even go to the casino but I only lose money, I’ve never won once. Today is still my first win, Brother He Yan, I definitely have to be your brother. today is our day of worship, I will buy you a drink!”

 “Ahem,” Liang Ping put a finger between his lips and said, “No alcohol is allowed in the camp.”

“Then I’ll buy you tea!” Cheng Lisu held He Yan’s hand, looking at He Yan as if he was looking at his long-lost relative, revealing a genuine closeness.

“That’s not necessary.” He Yan pulled her hand out and shoved the hairband into his hand, “I almost forgot about this. Thank you for the hairband, Master Cheng.”

“Between you and me, there’s no need to say thank you.” Cheng Lisu smiled, he then remembered something AND suddenly turned his head and spoke to Wang Ba, “Hey, you , have you forgotten something?”

“What?” He Yan was puzzled.

“Did you forget your bet?” Cheng Lisu hurriedly replied to He Yan, “You made a bet with him. If you lose, you will go to become a guerilla soldier, and if he loses he has to call you Boss. Now that he’s lost, he has to fulfill his bet!”

Wang Ba’s entire body stiffened.

The people around him all started laughing, and Liang Ping turned his back, as it wasn’t his place to participate after this. Mak and Hong Shan leaned together to watch the fun and He Yan raised her eyebrows and looked at Wang Ba.

Wang Ba stepped in front of He Yan. He was much taller than her, and she looked excessively skinny in front of him. His face was red, and even the old scar on his face was now bright red as if it was dripping blood.

He Yan noticed his clenched fists and sighed silently in his heart. Asking him to call her a boss might be even more embarrassing than killing this man. He Yan was about to say to forget it, but Wang Ba was already speaking in a low voice, “…Boss.”

He Yan, “…”

She raised her eyes to Wang Ba, but Wang Ba thought she was about to get trouble for him and said, in an annoyed tone, “I already called! It’s up to you if you didn’t hear me, I’m not going to say it again!”

“I heard that.” He Yan laughed, “I’m just surprised that you actually said.”

“A real man’s words are as heavy as nine tripods [1]s, I’m a man of my word!” Wang Ba snorted coldly, “You’re lucky this time, don’t mess with me in the future…!” After saying this, he seemed to feel very ashamed. Unwilling to stay there he turned around to leave in a hurry.

He Yan pondered for a moment and secretly said, “This Wang Ba, indeed, is violent and is also quite capable of bending.

“Brother He Yan, look at you, you’re amazing!” Cheng Lisu posted up again, “To celebrate, let’s go, I’ll buy you a cup of tea!”

He Yan was pulled away by the happy teenager before he could refuse.

….

“Master Cheng has left with He Yan.” In the loft, Shen Han asked, “General, should we go and chase him back?”

“No need,” said Xiao Jue. After watching the contest he seemed to be tired, so he turned and walked out. Shen Han hurriedly followed, thought of something, and looked at Xiao Jue again, calculating silently in his heart.

The General said that the untamed one was He Yan, he didn’t believe it at first, but now it seemed that it was true. Regardless of He Yan’s appearance, who was so skinny and small, he could get a bandit leader to call him boss. Wasn’t such a kid difficult to deal with? If this continued, he would be able to worship with the general.

However, when Shen Han glanced at Xiao Jue’s cold face, the general didn’t seem to think much of this kid either.

[1] Every word carries weight

# Chapter 54: **NINE BANNERS BATTALION**

Not only did He Yan fail to worship with Xiao Jue, but instead had to deal with his pestering nephew.

Cheng Lisu pulled He Yan into a room where he lived in the guardhouse. It was a separate room, just for him. Although it wasn’t decorated luxuriously, it was far better than where the recruits lived.

The room was even lit with the incense, held by an exquisite incense burner. Cheng Lisu noticed that He Yan was staring at it, and explained, “This is a good purchase I brought from the capital. Although Uncle doesn’t allow me to light it here, I do it secretly, so don’t tell him.”

 He’s like a child who secretly did bad things behind his elder’s back.

E*ven if it was her, she wouldn’t let it slide,*He Yan thought. It’s summer, and the weather was blistering hot, so who would like to be flustered by fragrance and smoke?

He Yan didn’t speak, Cheng Lisu once again misunderstood, and tentatively asked, “Do you like this very much? If you like it, I’ll give it to you!” He stuffed the incense burner into He Yan’s hand, “It’s okay, these are nothing in front of our relationship “

He Yan put it back in his hands, “…Thank you, but I have no place to put it.”

Cheng Lisu thought for a while, and nodded regretfully, “I will go back to my uncle, and ask him to give you another room, just like me.”

“…”

It would be strange if Xiao Jue agreed! If Cheng Lisu really can accomplish this, she can call him Big Brother Cheng Lisu if he wants!

“By the way, you don’t know who my uncle is, do you? My uncle is the current military governor, General Fengyun Second young master, your superior.” Cheng Lisu finished in one breath, then went to see He Yan’s expression. “Why are you not surprised at all?”

Is she supposed to be surprised? He Yan remarked, “I think that if the son is very handsome, unlike an ordinary person, then the uncle of the said son should be the same. Sure enough, as expected, a great uncle would have you as his nephew.”

This pleased Cheng Lisu. He gave a shy smile, scratched his head, and muttered embarrassedly, “That’s not true, I’m far behind my uncle. My uncle lives next door to me, but he’s out now… Otherwise, I would have taken you to see him.”

*That’s not necessary.*

“Come here, I’ve poured the tea.” Cheng Lisu was so busy that he stuffed a cup of tea into He Yan’s hand, “After drinking this cup of tea, we will worship each other as brothers!”

He Yan looked at the tea in his hand, hesitated, and put the cup back on the table.

Cheng Lisu was confused, “What’s the matter?”

“Master Cheng, I don’t think we can be called brothers. We are from different generations.” He Yan confessed.

She and Xiao Jue are of the same generation, but Cheng Lisu calls Xiao Jue ‘Uncle’. If she and Cheng Lisu worshipped each other, then wouldn’t she also have to call Xiao Jue ‘Uncle’ in the future?

Could she let Xiao Jue take advantage of this? You wish!

“Why do you say we’re from a different generation?” Cheng Lisu was puzzled. “I am fifteen this year and I heard from Instructor Liang that you are sixteen. We are not too far apart.”

“You call Xiao… General ‘Uncle’, right? He too is not old as well.” He Yan said. Xiao Jue was only one year older than her former self, and now she has just reached adulthood. She asked, “Is he your real uncle?”

“Well, we are related.” Cheng Lisu explained very seriously.

It turned out that Cheng Lisu’s mother, Mrs. Cheng, wife of superior Zhirang, and Xiao Jue were cousins. It’s just that Mrs. Cheng and Xiao Jue are too far apart in age. When Xiao Jue was born, Mrs. Cheng was already married, and there was very little contact between the two. However, when Cheng Lisu grew up, he loved to stick to his little uncle who was about his age.

He Yan thought, as she remembered the time when she was in Xianchang Hall, a white and chubby boy often came to Xiao Jue, but she had forgotten whether he called Xiao Jue “Uncle” or not.

“My uncle is excellent in everything. He’s one of the best in the world in terms of his skills in writing and martial arts. I have to follow him so that others don’t dare to scold me again as a ‘waste of a gentleman’ anymore.” Cheng Lisu was not ashamed of his nickname, “Now that I’m friends with you, and you are as good as my uncle, I’m amazing!”

He Yan, “…” I don’t know where to talk about this greatness.

Speaking of He Yan, Cheng Lisu thought of something and asked her, “By the way, you are so good, Brother He, what does your family do?”

She didn’t drink the tea, but he already started to call her “Brother He”. He Yan didn’t know whether to answer his question or correct his statement first. “My family is quite ordinary.”

She didn’t want to say more. Her appearance fell into Cheng Lisu’s eyes. Cheng Lisu solemnly said, “I understand. Experts like you do not want to reveal their whereabouts.”

He Yan moaned in her heart,*I’m afraid, is this child brain-dead?*

“You are so capable, why come to Liangzhou?” Cheng Lisu asked, “With this body like yours, why bother to join the army?”

He Yan repeated what she had said to his uncle to the nephew again, “To make meritorious deeds, to be rewarded, build a house, marry a wife, and have children. Life should not be lived in vain.”

The nephew was not as impulsive as his uncle. The red-faced and white-toothed teenager looked at her for a while and nodded in praise, “The idea of yours is very good, very… practical. But, Brother He, isn’t it too late for you to join the army and make achievements? There is no war to fight in these years? Wars can be fought, and it’s said that heroes emerge in troubled times. We are in a peaceful and prosperous world. You have nowhere to use your martial arts. What a waste.”

He Yan, “…” This kid was quite thoughtful.

“Why don’t I point out a clear path for you?” Cheng Lisu approached her and whispered, “You know the Nanfu soldiers under my uncle, right?”

He Yan nodded, “I’ve heard of it.” The Nanfu Soldiers were established by General Xiao, they are invincible in the battles.

“In the Nanfu Soldiers, there is an assault cavalry, the Nine Banners Battalion.”

Nine Banners Battalion, He Yan knew that this was a trusted force that Xiao Jue had cultivated for himself after he took over the soldiers from the Nanfu. They mostly did raiding and charging with strange means.

“Uncle came to Liangzhou this time. Among other things, he has to pick some people from this batch of recruits and bring them back to join the Nine Banners Battalion.”

He Yan was startled, “Isn’t the Nine Banners Battalion no longer accepting people?”

“That’s only what is known to the outside world. The rarest thing in the world is talent. Everyone in the Nine Banners Battalion is well accomplished. Last time, an elder brother was injured and broke a hand. He was not able to fight anymore, so now he is an official in the court. To make meritorious service, get promoted, and make a fortune, you must first find the right place. You are very skilled and are already one of our own. You should go to the Nine Banners Battalion.” The young man uttered slowly and methodically.

He Yan gradually put away her smile. After a while, she frowned and said coldly, “Did you tell anyone what you said just now?”

Her eyes were cold and severe. Cheng Lisu was taken aback, and whispered, “No…”

“Then remember, others must not know of this.”

Cheng Lisu immediately bobbed his head up and down, “…Ok.”

He Yan was satisfied. She bent her eyebrows and eyes, and the corners of her lips curled up, “But what you just said was right.”

“Huh?” Cheng Lisu was dazed.

The fastest possible promotion, this was the next best thing. If she fought hard on the battlefield, it would be too slow, even if she was actually promoted, she might not come into contact with the He family. But to be together with Xiao Jue is different. General Feng Yun and General Fei Hong are deadly arch-rivals. Based on this alone, she could achieve countless things.

What’s more, it would be much simpler to inquire about the affairs of the court with Xiao Jue by her side. She had never thought of any entanglements with Xiao Jue in her previous life, but now she has to rack her brains to become his confidant. This was incredible, but could just be a coincidence.

He Yan drank all the tea in her teacup, stood up, and announced, “I want to enter the Nine Banners Battalion.”

# Chapter 55: **JIANG JIAO**

During summer, days in Liang Zhou were long and unbearable, and it was accompanied by hard, boring, tedious training every day. But the days went on. After the start of summer, there was the middle of summer, and soon after the scorching heat, hopefully, a cool autumn would emerge.

The training on hot days quickly educated the new recruits of the Liang Zhou Guards to have excellent endurance and determination. Each month, in addition to the crossbow and the early morning weight-loading run, they practiced knives, battle formation, spear, sword art, and mounted archery. Riding archery was practiced less, as Liang Zhou guards had limited soldiers and horses.

“Brother He, your loaf of bread.” Mak handed the dry dough to He Yan.

The round loaves were baked over charcoal, crispy and salty. After one bite, even the dregs of the cakes were hot, and when He Yan took another one, she gulped down a large mouthful of water. She felt her empty belly soothed and became comfortable.

Hong Shan stared at He Yan and wondered, “Ah He, I just don’t feel right. You said you eat the same as us every day, sometimes you even open a small stove to make something, so why are you still so thin and… small?” He stifled back the word “short”.

He Yan, “…”

Could you blame her for this?

Even her sworn brother, the “trashy prince” Cheng Lisu, came over every now and then. He would always slip He Yan some food, sometimes a handful of pine nuts or a few pieces of dried meat, and once even a bowl of soup, saying that it was from his uncle.

Whenever he came, Cheng Lisu was almost always nervous, “Quick, quick, eat right here, you can’t be seen by my uncle.” It felt like a secret visit to the prison. Sometimes He Yan really didn’t want to eat, so why bother? But on second thought, there was no need to go overboard with the food, and besides, the food that Cheng Lisu had sent was quite tasty.

But even this opening of this small stove didn’t make He Yan look sturdier. Instead, she was busy training daily and sweating, and after a few months, she lost a lot of weight and looked even more pitiful.

However, the little guy surprised all of the Liang Zhou guards with his crossbow, from making the bandit-born scarred man call out to him as Boss, to being the cause of countless new recruits losing so many dry pieces of bread in one day. This memory was still fresh in their minds. He Yan was now considered famous.

After that, no one came to compete with He Yan for the time being, and He Yan was also happy to relax. She still thought about how to get Xiao Jue to notice her so that she could save the trouble and enter the Nine Banners Camp.

Today’s practice focused on spears. Most of the spears in the arena were made of dense wood, with hard shafts and short, sharp blades.

The instructor threw the dull weapons on the stage, and the recruits followed suit, as they practiced for a while, but with little success. He Yan herself was not very good with spears, as she was used to using a sword. Now that she has become Miss He, she is small and it was inconvenient to use a spear, so she felt her hands and feet become tied.

After performing a set of spear techniques, Instructor Liang let the new recruits practice by themselves, and he couldn’t help but take a second look at He Yan when he came down to inspect the stage.

After all, He Yan’s previous crossbow technique was so hard to forget. This new recruit was valued. But these days, Instructor Liang also noticed that He Yan’s skills with the Whip, Knives, Steps, spears, and Sword were all pretty good, but far from amazing, and the only surprising thing was the Riding Archery, but since there was no competition these days, she could only show so much.

She trained seriously every day, and never slacked off. But Instructor Liang still had a feeling that the teenager seemed to have reservations, and what she showed daily was only a part of it.

He went back to Instructor Du Mao Du’s position. Instructor Du was also in the process of his rounds, and several instructors surrounded him, as they pointed at a new recruit and said something.

As Liang Ping walked over, he started to hear the conversations.

“It’s worthy that his family owns a martial arts school, look at that long spear technique, amazing!”

“I’ll say, he’s actually more skilled than you, old Du. I’ve never even seen that set of marksmanship!”

“This kid isn’t very old, I guess he’s only seventeen or eighteen, he’s been practicing since he was a kid.”

Liang Ping asked, “Who are you guys talking about?”

“That one, the soldier under Instructor Du, the one on the far left of the front row, the big tall one, see?”

Liang Ping looked over in the direction he pointed and indeed saw a young man in a strong looking outfit practicing his spear. This young man bore with thick eyebrows and big eyes, his features straight. Between his eyebrows, there was an air of perseverance, but also a hint of arrogance. He had a steady pace, and his hands dazzled. It wasn’t fancy, but Liang Ping could feel that every step of his spear dance had its own fury.

“Good!” Liang Ping couldn’t help but praise.

“It’s really good,” Du Mao was also proud of him, “I’ve tried him a few times before, and he has real skills. His name is Jiang Jiao, and his father is the owner of a martial arts school in the capital.”

“Then he’s still here to join the army?” Liang Ping was surprised. As the young proprietor of the martial arts school, although he can’t be called a rich man, in an ordinary family, he could eat and drink without worrying about his life.

“He has big ambitions. Don’t you understand men’s aspirations?” Du Mao said, “I admire such men!”

Someone interjected, “I wonder who is more powerful compared to this Jiang Jiao and He Yan under Old Liang?”

As soon as the words came out, everyone quieted down. Du Mao looked thoughtfully at him. Liang Ping subconsciously said back, “He Yan is quite talented at the crossbow, but his spearman-ship is mediocre, not a match for Jiang Jiao’s.”

Joking aside, He Yan was small and thin, but this Jiang Jiao was very tall and strong, and there was a difference between comparing spear skills and archery skills. With bow and arrow, the prey is a straw man, a flying bird, or a walking beast. Spearman-ship was a competition between the two individuals, and if they were not careful, they would suffer bloodshed. Jiang Jiao’s family opened a martial arts school, and he had practiced martial arts since childhood, so how could He Yan be Jiang Jiao’s opponent? If he was beaten up by Jiang Jiao, where would he find another fine archer like him?

“Old Liang, you can’t say that.” Du Mao did not give up and turned to hook Liang Ping’s shoulders, “That He Yan under you, always lagged behind while running in the beginning, but now, he was able to run with ease. Before, he wasn’t able to even pull a bow, but in the end, he could even shoot blindfolded. If you say he can’t do it, he might return triumphant again ten days later. As the instructor, you can’t be too protective of the new recruits. After all, they will all have to go to the battlefield someday in the future.”

The people around them chimed in, “Right, right, Old Du is right! Old Liang, you can’t protect the calf forever.”

*Right, my ass!* Liang Ping thought angrily in his heart as a bunch of people watched the fun in making him uneasy and restless.

“Instructor Liang, I also want to have a match with He Yan.”

Liang Ping turned back. Jiang Jiao had already put down his long spear at some point and walked behind him. He probably heard the talk between the instructors and came to deliver this statement.

Liang Ping pondered on how to refuse.

“May I?” As if unaware of his dilemma, Jiang Jiao asked again.

# Chapter 56: **THE SPEAR**

“May I?”

*I don’t think so*, Liang Ping thought to himself.

He was about to say it when someone else chimed in, “Hey, what’s the point of asking Instructor Liang when you could just ask He Yan? Isn’t this a pretty simple matter? If he’s willing to compete, then let it go. That kid’s already got a plan in mind.”

Du Mao nodded, “That’s reasonable.”

He turned and said to Jiang Jiao, “You can go and ask He Yan directly. The contest is fine but,” after a pause, he warned, “Remember, don’t hurt anyone.”

As the conversation had reached this point, Liang Ping had no choice but to watch Jiang Jiao head towards He Yan.

When Jiang Jiao observed Instructor Liang’s group of new recruits, he immediately spotted He Yan playing with a spear. She didn’t stand out because she was bright, but rather because she was strikingly thin amongst the group of strong men. Jiang Jiao stayed behind and quietly observed He Yan for a while.

He Yan might simply be taking the spear back in and throwing it repeatedly, but she practised with determination. His common marksmanship showed no laziness.

After watching her for a while, someone noticed him and asked, “Brother, why are you watching us from here?”

“I was trying to find someone,” Jiang Jiao said and strode closer to He Yan.

He Yan threw her spear forward.

Suddenly, a figure held the spearhead, causing the man to stagger two steps backwards.

She wondered as she raised her head, *Why did you grab my spear blade?*

Still clasping onto the spearhead, a hint of amazement surfaced in Jiang Jiao’s heart. Although He Yan looked like a soft spear dancer with little strength, the throw said the opposite. If it wasn’t for the fact that his family runs a martial arts school, he would’ve been stabbed and fallen to the ground.

Whilst contemplating this, his heart dripped with contempt.

Jiang Jiao looked at He Yan seriously, “I heard that Brother He is peerless. How about a spar with Brother He on the long spear?”

He Yan blinked, realizing that this was another person who came to kick the hall [1].

Hong Shan stood behind He Yan and smacked his head after hearing the declaration, “Bad. People are afraid of being famous, pigs are afraid of being strong. Last time when Ah He won over Wang Ba, I knew it was going to be bad. See, this is the second challenger.”

“Will there be more after that?” Mak asked quietly.

“There’ll be plenty of them- there’ll always be a third, fourth and fifth one,” Hong Shan shook his head, “Humans…they just love to fight for themselves, but I’ll never understand what’s the point of competing over and over again?”

*What’s the point?* The anecdote amused He Yan. Xiao Jue rarely observes new recruits practising. So, In order for Xiao Jue to discover her as an extraordinary hero among talented men, she had to prove herself and achieve fame by accepting challenges from people like Wang Ba to enter the Nine Banners Camp.

But for some reason, no one challenged her since Wang Ba and she sparred using the crossbow. He Yan guessed that, on one hand, it was probably because the lost bets of bread had hurt the new recruit’s ego- so much so that they didn’t want to see her for the time being. On the other hand, she couldn’t just initiate challenges to everyone in the vicinity.

Right now, there was a competitor. Someone still came to ‘give her a pillow [2]’, and she wasn’t even sleepy. Wasn’t that wonderful?

“Okay,” He Yan kept her spear by her side, “How do you want to compete?”

Her response was so crisp that Jiang Jiao himself was startled. After a moment’s hesitation, he replied, “We spar in close quarters.”

“Okay,” He Yan said, “You go and get your weapon. Let’s spar on the arena stage.”

“You…” Jiang Jiao was baffled, “Don’t you want to wait for ten days?”

He Yan was stunned and a little beguiled, “No, not every time.”

Did they think she needed ten days again? She needed ten days last time because of her lack of arm strength. Now, in addition to her daily training, she had stone locks on top of her routine. Even though she still wasn’t on par with the Rexes and Hercules of her group, it was sufficient for drawing ordinary crossbows.

The few instructors who had heard of the news huddled together, and someone nudged Liang Ping’s arm, “Old Liang, I told you earlier, maybe this new recruit of yours isn’t bothered by this competition. It’s just you worrying about it!”

“…”

He thought that He Yan would decline because if He Yan personally refused the match, Jiang Jiao would not have anything else to say. He didn’t expect He Yan to agree. Or, was he so confident in winning every challenge?

“I’m kind of looking forward to it,” Du Mao pulled off the cowhide water bag from his waist and took a sip of water.

Staring at He Yan heading towards the high platform, he remarked, “How about we make a bet?”

“No bets,” Liang Ping flatly refused. The recruits lost their dry bread and starved for a whole month. It was scary to watch. Why should the instructors bet when their recruits don’t gamble anymore?

“He’s a coward. If he doesn’t want to bet, then I will,” another instructor said, “I’ll bet on the yellow wine issued at the end of the month, and I’ll bet on Jiang Jiao to win!”

……

Cheng Lisu’s first reaction to the news of He Yan and Jiang Jiao competing in spear combat was to look for Xiao Jue in the next room.

When he arrived in a rushed state, Xiao Jue was talking to his personal bodyguard. He frowned at the sight, “Cheng Lisu, why do you look like you’ve been running around?”

“Uncle, I’ve come to tell you about a good show!”

Xiao Jue motioned for the secret guard to leave.

After the guard left, he asked, “What is it this time?”

“My new friend, Brother He, is going to have a long spear contest today!” Cheng Lisu tugged on Xiao Jue’s sleeve, “It’s about to start at the arena. How about we go and check it out?”

“He Yan?” Xiao Jude raised his eyebrows.

He remembered He Yan. In just a few months, this person’s name had already spread throughout Liang Zhou. First, it was running, then it went from being unable to draw a bow to becoming Cheng Lisu’s sworn brother. In addition, he turned a blind eye to the fact that Cheng Lisu secretly went and delivered food to He Yan every now and then. He treated it as a child’s play.

But determination and persistence shone through this man. His qualifications might be mediocre, but every night, after the recruits went to bed, he would run to the arena and continue training until the third quarter of the night before returning to his room to rest.

“Yeah, you know my big brother too!” Cheng Lisu tugged on Xiao Jue’s sleeve, attempting to drag him outside, “I heard it was that kid who took the initiative to approach my brother, but my brother will teach him what true marksmanship is!”

Xiao Jue glanced at him, “Sleeve.”

Cheng Lisu immediately let go of his sleeve and hugged his arm instead. He begged, “Uncle, just go and take a look with me. My brother is great! He won’t be any worse than those Rexes from your Nine Banners Camp!”

Xiao Jue sneered. He didn’t want to comment on what his nephew had said. Even so, his steps didn’t falter and were finally dragged outside.

Cheng Lisu was relieved and secretly thought to himself, *Big Brother, this is all I can do for you.*

[1] came to challenge

[2]everything goes so well, having what you want without making efforts,

[3](of the firing of a shot, bullet, or other missiles) from very close to its target.

# Chapter 57: **THE KING OF ALL WEAPONS**

The high platform in the arena with an open view was a good place for a tournament. It was where the chief instructor spoke on weekdays.

The new recruits gathered around the high platform, watching the two on the stage.

Jiang Jiao had already gotten his spear. He was tall and strong and was born valiant looking- probably because he has been practising martial arts since childhood. Hence, he looked different from the other new recruits. People felt at ease with him.

The person opposite to him was He Yan. Compared to him, He Yan was more like an undeveloped teenager: short, thin but with delicate and beautiful facial features. After such a long period of training and sunbathing, the teenager was tanned. However, he was still very fair in contrast to the other surrounding recruits. He stood there, not looking like a new recruit, but as a young master of a big family instead- gentle, handsome and lovely.

Jiang Jiao raised his long spear, “You first.”

Still quite considerate, He Yan smiled at him and said, “Then I won’t be courteous.”

She crossed the long spear in front of her body. Her eyes moved slightly as her body had already rushed forward.

Jiang Jiao’s face changed as he met her.

The two figures mingled together in an instant. The sound of ‘bang bang bang bang’ echoed. In a mere time span, they seemed to have fought a dozen moves before the two of them backed down a few steps in unison whilst staring at each other.

He Yan looked at Jiang Jiao with the same smile as before, while Jiang Jiao was unable to hide the shock in his eyes.

As soon as they fought, he knew that it was impossible for her to be a beginner in spear training. The moves she used against him were so dangerous that he could neither attack nor retreat.

It’s an even match!

He thought that he had already overestimated He Yan, but in the end, he had still underestimated her.

The recruits at the bottom didn’t understand. They simply felt that it wasn’t fun to watch He Yan and Jiang Jiao stop after making a few moves. They were dissatisfied and discussed amongst themselves, “What just happened? Who’s got the upper hand?”

“I just had a mouthful of water. What did I miss? Did you see anything?”

“No, I didn’t see anything.”

Under the arena, the instructors were staring at each other, speechless for a long while.

Du Mao looked at Liang Ping who waved his hand in a row, “I don’t know! Don’t ask me! He’s never shown that level of skill during his regular practice! I don’t know anything!”

The new recruits didn’t understand, but the instructors could clearly see that He Yan and Jiang Jiao were equal in terms of their skill. Jiang Jiao’s spear technique was complex and versatile, as flexible as a snake. Conversely, He Yan’s spear technique seemed simple and basic, but it had strength and could easily deflect Jiang Jiao’s spear.

“Liang Ping, you’ve really gained a good soldier.” An instructor sourly said.

Liang Ping’s heart was proud yet terrified. This He Yan was too secretive. If it wasn’t for Jiang Jiao’s initiative in competing with He Yan, he would’ve thought that He Yan was quite talented with the crossbow but only had average spearmanship.

On the stage, Jiang Jiao stared at He Yan and said, “Again!”

He Yan nodded.

This time, it was Jiang Jiao who struck first with his spear, and He Yan greeted him. The two spears were glued together, red tassels fluttering in the wind. Jiang Jiao’s spear was like a snake, each strike was dangerous and fast. It went straight to He Yan’s face, but she was able to turn her head slightly. And the spear blade swept away after brushing her cheek.

Jiang Jiao was beginning to get pensive. As menacing as a rainstorm, Jiang Jiao tried to find He Yan’s opening with each consecutive shot. Miraculously, He Yan was dexterous, and every time, she narrowly avoided it. The spear in his hand seemed to become an impregnable shield, blocking Jiang Jiao’s spear, rendering him unable to get any closer.

“Faster, faster! He was so close to beating him!”The audience of recruits were anxious.

“Why is He Yan only defending and not offending? Does he not know how to attack?”

As time passed, Jiang Jiao’s spear techniques were no longer supportive of such an intense attack. He stared at He Yan, wondering how that seemingly weak teenager could have such strength and endurance in his body. He wasn’t tired at all. The only thing he could see in him was focus….and such focus was frightening.

In a trance, the spear in Jiang Jiao’s hand was drawn into the air. His heart shook. And he only saw the teenager opposite to him reveal a smile. Jiang Jiao didn’t have time to react. The long spear in He Yan’s hand, defensive till now, suddenly stabbed him in the front. He hurriedly moved his spear to block and was stabbed off to the side.

He Yan started to attack.

“The spear is the king of all weapons. All weapons who meet the spear stand defeated.”

The young man’s voice was clear; not too loud yet not too quiet. The mountains were empty, and his voice vibrated enough to spread across the arena.

With a short stance, she avoided Jiang Jiao’s spear and stabbed Jiang Jiao’s face from bottom to top at a tricky angle.

“Descending spear style is used against the staff. Left and right floral styles are for finding openings.”

He Yan moved and turned the head of the spear and rushed forward again.

“Pair fighting style breaks swords, forks, shovels, double knives and short knives.”

Her arm seemed to have infinite strength. Blocking as she ran forward, stabbed Jiang Jiao left and right, leaving him unable to respond in time with a wretched look.

“The hook pounce method breaks the whip and the mace.”

She went forward again, the spear blade drove like a gust of wind in the rain, even more accurate and precise than Jiang Jiao’s attack on her just now. She directly seized Jiang Jiao’s every weakness by avoiding the fatal spots at seven inches at most.

“Hollow string style can break a dagger or a halberd.”

Jiang Jiao was forced to the edge of the arena. He was in a trance and only felt that the young man in front of him was like a soldier riding a horse on the battlefield. His fury was uncontrollable, as sharp and unstoppable as a bamboo. He was forced to retreat steadily and was defeated.

Jiang Jiao panicked. Suddenly, his foot slipped and he fell. His ears were filled with the screams of the new recruits off-stage. Jiang Jiao accepted that he had no way of retreating.

All at once, a hand pulled him up.

The spear pointed at his forehead, and there was no further advancement, the teenager looked thin and weak, but possessed great strength. He pulled him back onto the arena, withdrawing the long spear back to his side.

The wind blew away the heat of the party, leaving them with a feeling of coolness. The flag moved slightly with the wind as birds and insects chirped in the forest.

The young man stood upright, his voice still crisp without the trace of weariness or tiredness after the fight. Taking her time, she said, “People do not see the real power of spears, so they lose their faith in other weapons. If one finds a real spear, he would find all the other weapons as child’s play.”

Jiang Jiao was startled and looked at him for a long while. He gently said, “Have you read the Record of Arms?”

The Record of Arms has records of various spear and sword techniques. Jiang Jiao had read it because his family owned a martial arts school. His grandfather, his father, his brother and he had to read it. He had to read it as it was mandatory but felt that the book exaggerated too much and that no one would follow it. But here he is, facing this young man. He knew that he had failed his studies.

The young man tilted his head to look at him with a grin on his face, and said, “I have read a little bit, so I have some understanding of it.”

# Chapter 58: **HE YAN, THE CHAMPION**

The recruits tilted their heads to look at He Yan.

The dozen moves from earlier were too short and it was difficult for them to see who had the upper hand. Yet at this point, there was no need for bystanders to demand an explanation. He Yan forced Jiang Jiao to the edge of the arena, causing him to almost fall. Clearly, Jiang Jiao had lost.

This teenager won again.

“Brother He is so powerful,” Mak murmured, “He’s getting stronger and stronger.”

Hong Shan scratched his head, “This kid. He didn’t tell us he’s this good before.”

“It’s not the first time he’s practised with a spear.” Shi spoke up after being silent for a while, “That’s why that guy can’t beat him.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Hong Shan exclaimed with surprise, “Ah He is the young master of a family. Do big families usually practice crossbows and spears at home?”

It wasn’t that He Yan couldn’t hear the whispers from the recruit but this was the perfect opportunity for her. She threw the long spear to the ground and took two steps forward, “Brothers, I have won again today.”

She said this without concealing the complacency with a hint of sarcasticness on her face. It was dazzling.

“What does this brat want?” Du Mao asked.

No one knew what He Yan’s intentions were.

He Yan smiled and continued, “In the future, there might be a few more who want to challenge me. Please don’t worry as I won’t refuse to fight. But I’ll only accept one match a day.”

The corner of Instructor Liang’s mouth twitched, “This guy, does he think he could set up a ring?”

The ‘ringmaster’, He Yan, had no care about the opinions of bystanders, and said, “Whipping, knife fighting, fencing, spear fighting, sword riding, archery; everyone in the barracks are all welcome to challenge me. Don’t worry, I won’t take your dry bread if I win. Anyone willing to fight can come and duel with me.”

Even though he knew that this teenager was equipped with great skills, this sentiment was too arrogant.

“How could there be such an arrogant person?”

“He’s not modest at all. He’s only managed to outsmart people with the crossbow and spear. Has he forgotten how big the world is?”

“Could it be…does he think that we couldn’t find anyone better than him in the great Liang Zhou? There are tens of thousands of sons and daughters and not one of them can win against him?”

He Yan laughed softly and thought to herself, it’s not like there isn’t anyone who can win against her. The young master who can fight at her level is the only one who doesn’t care to fight her at all.

She stated, “A gentleman’s word is a promise. To all the instructors and brothers who are here today, I, He Yan, will keep my word! If I win, I’m entitled to a sparring match, and if I lose, brothers are free to make demands but,” She seemed awkward, “That should be impossible.”

It would be better if she hadn’t said anything. As soon as she did, there was a sudden outcry from the new recruits.

“He’s belittling us!”

“Even the Liang Zhou Guards say that ten fingers have different lengths [1], does this kid think he’s General Feng Yun?”

“Forget it, we’ll see him again in a few days. There’ll be a time when he loses his face!”

He Yan gestured arrogantly on the stage before walking down. Without slowing down, she turned to an uncertain Jiang Jiao standing on the side, “To be honest, you’re actually very good with your long spear.”

Jiang Jiao was stunned, unsure of her subliminal message.

“But you’ve met me and I’ve beaten you. It’s obvious that I’m better.” She laughed loudly and walked off stage, no longer paying attention to Jiang Jiao.

On the other end, Du Mao’s face was as deep as the darkest ocean. It was fine that He Yan competed with Jiang Jiao but He Yan had just crushed Jiang Jiao’s pride without any hesitation. Jiao Jiao would no doubt be devastated. This was not what he wanted to see.

He patted Liang Ping’s shoulder and went over to Jiang Jiao with the intention to console the new recruit who had been slaughtered like a chicken under the butcher’s knife on his first try [2]. He didn’t want to lose a potentially good seedling.

……

On the pavilion next to the arena, Cheng Lisu jumped up and down and pointed in the direction as if he was the one who had just won the duel, “Uncle, my Big Brother He has won again! He’s really good! No one can beat him!”

Xiao Jue glanced at him. Without paying attention to him and his endless praise, he turned to walk out.

Cheng Lisu remembered something and hastily ran to Xiao Jue’s side, jumping left and right, “Uncle, look at him! First in crossbow, first in spear. He’ll be first in the whip, knife and all the other weapons in the future! He’s the number one in Liang Zhou Guards…besides you…right?”

“Wait until he gets first place in everything.” Xiao Jue replied nonchalantly.

“He’s won two duels now! It’s only a matter of time before he becomes first place in the other weapon duels too. And two wins is already quite a feat, isn’t it? Uncle, look at him. How many people can we meet with such outstanding talent? Isn’t it worth putting him in your Nine Banners Battalion? Uncle, just look at him!”

Xiao Jue paused, his gaze fell onto Cheng Lisu.

Cheng Lisu was delighted, thinking he had moved Xiao Jue. In the next moment, Xiao Jue stared blankly into his eyes and slowly spoke, “You’ve been mentioning He Yan quite frequently lately and you’ve mentioned the Nine Banners Battalion twice now. You’ve never paid attention to the Nine Banners Battalion before,” He cooly continued, “Cheng Lisu, are you trying to facilitate He Yan into the Nine Banners Battalion?”

Cheng Lisu’s heart jumped, the secret was out in the open, “No, no, I just…want you to pay more attention to my Big Brother.”

“Do you think I’m stupid, or do you think you’re smarter than me?”

Cheng Lisu looked at him for a moment and hung his head in frustration, “I’m the one who’s stupid…”

“How do you know about the Nine Banners Camp?” Xiao Jue asked.

Xiao Jue’s gaze was serene and there were no signs of anger. Nevertheless, Cheng Lisu felt cold and answered honestly, “I lived next door to you before and heard Chief Instructor Shen talking to you. That’s how I knew about the Nine Banners Battalion and the plan to recruit new members from the Liang Zhou Guards, so-”

Xiao Jue laughed lightly and mocked, “So you took this news and couldn’t wait to please your ‘Big Brother’?”

“No, no. I’m also genuinely thinking for my Uncle,” Cheng Lisu hastily denied, “I’ve got nothing to do for most of my days, so I’ve spent my time walking around and looking at the recruits of the Liang Zhou Guards. Brother He’s the only one worthy of entering the threshold of the Nine Banners Battalion. The others can’t even beat my Brother He, how can they enter your fine cavalry? My conscience is loyal to you!”

After a moment of silence, Xiao Jue asked, “What did he say?”

“Huh?” Cheng Lisu was stunned at first, realizing that Xiao Jue was referring to He Yan, he replied, “After I finished speaking with Brother He, he seemed very happy. Moreover, he said that he wants to enter the Nine Banners Battalion.”

“He said ‘he wants to’?” Xiao Jue repeated his words icily.

Cheng Lisu shrank back as if a gust of cold wind blew against his neck and nodded, “Is there anything wrong with ‘he wants to’…?”

Xiao Jue chuckled lightly, his autumn water-like clear eyes floating with inexplicable emotions. After a moment, he restrained his emotions and spoke casually, “This person does not lack courage nor does he have small ambitions.”

[1] no one is perfect  
[2] without spending much effort, Kill: handle, execute, do; chicken: trivial little things, small things; scalpel: people or things with powerful functions and great capabilities. It’s like doing small things without great effort.

# Chapter 59: Sword Competition

On this day, He Yan made a big scene again.

One the way back, He Yan encountered Wang Ba who was hiding in the crowd; he came to observe He Yan and Jiang Jiao spar with the spear. He wanted to leave after watching but was accidentally caught by He Yan.

He Yan greeted him from far away, “Brother Wang!”

To the public’s perspective, Wang Ba’s face turned black as he called out boss like a mosquito. He Yan looked at him with a smile as he turned and ran away as if someone was chasing him from behind.

“Brother Ah He, you’re really good.” Mak said with envy.

“There’ll be more and more things like this in the future. You have to get used to it.” He Yan stood on tip-toe and rubbed Mak’s head.

Hong Shan snorted when he saw this, “You should grow up first if you’re trying to be someone’s boss.”

He Yan shrugged her shoulders. It’s not up to people to make things like this happen. It’s all up to the Heavens. Things like growing up cannot be forced.

She was in a good mood today. At night when He Yan went back to sleep after her sneaky training late at night, she had an unprecedented dream.

In her dream, she was standing on the high platform of the martial arts arena. Everyone was calling her boss. Cheng Lisu ran over and said to her with a warm smile, “Brother He, you’ve finally entered the Nine Banners Battalion!”

“Really?” She was very happy, but then she suddenly heard a voice, “He Ru Fei?”

She turned around and saw that it was Xiao Jue. He was staring at her coldly, his words ridiculed her, “Are you He Yan or He Ru Fei?”

He Ru Fei. When she heard this name, she immediately woke up from her dream, sat up and touched her head. She was sweating profusely.

It was bright outside and Hong Shan was pushing the window open. Seeing her wipe her sweat, he casually said, “It’s extremely hot these days. I don’t want to spend the summer in Liang Zhou anymore. I might as well have lost a layer of fat from the heat.”

He Yan smiled, still a little unsure. Seeing this, Mak wondered, “Brother He doesn’t look well. Are you suffering from heatstroke? Do you want to drink some leaf tea?”

“No need. It’s just the weather,” He Yan got out of bed and put on her shoes, “I’ll go out and run to cool down by sweating.”

After an early morning weight-bearing run, she still managed to practice martial arts at the arena, and today was the day for swordsmanship practice. As the group practised, they saw another group of people approach He Yan.

He Yan put down the knife in her hand.

“What you said yesterday. Does that still count?” Asked the leader of the group in a deep voice.

The leader was a bald man with dragon eyebrows, a leopard neck and bronze bones. There was a string of Buddhist beads around his neck. The beads were warm and shone with a dark light and each bead was the size of a finger. He held a big gold-backed sword in both hands and was much older than He Yan. He must be past the age of perplexity, perhaps in his forties. And yet, the man did not look like a potato couch- he was like a taut bear.

“My name is Huang Xiong,” The bald man said in a dull voice, “I want to learn the sword technique with you.”

The eavesdropping recruits had their ears perked up and became excited, “Ah! Someone’s here, someone’s here, someone’s here! I told you. We have thousands of good men in Liang Zhou. It can’t be that not a single one out of these thousands can’t teach this kid to be a human!”

“Right, right. Destroy his narcissism and avenge our dry bread!”

“I don’t think He Yan can act cool this time. Look at the sword in Huang Xiong’s hand. It’s not an ordinary sword! I’m afraid he’s an experienced swordsman!”

He Yan also noticed the sword in Huang Xiong’s hand. The blade was reddish in colour. Whilst the back of the sword was extremely thick, the blade was sharp and the tip was flat with a slight curve. This type of sword was very heavy and ordinary people would find it difficult to wield, but this was just right to match a good man like Huang Xiong.

“You have a good sword.” He Yan praised.

Huang Xiong heard this and his eyes softened slightly, “It’s my 30-year-old friend.”

He Yan was speechless and couldn’t help but think of her Qing Lang sword. She was now a recruit again and unlike Huang Xiong, she had no sword to bring with her to Liang Zhou. There were no other weapons that suited her which made her feel uneasy.

Right now, she was very envious of Huang Xiong.

Huang Xiong saw that He Yan was hesitant to respond and frowned, “Didn’t you say yesterday that those who come forward are all welcome? Do you not want to fight now?”

He Yan was taken aback for a moment, and smiled, “When did I refuse? I’ll do as I’ve promised.”

Meeting the gaze of the crowd, she calmly walked onto the high platform of the arena stage.

In the audience, Liang Ping numbly watched He Yan’s movements.

Du Mao leaned against the tree and gloated, “This He Yan keeps picking a fight even though he’s your subordinate.”

Liang Ping couldn’t wait to go and smack him twice. If it weren’t for Du Mao’s nosiness from yesterday and letting Jiang Jiao and He Yan duel, He Yan would never have gone to the arena, nor would he have said such silly words such as setting up a ring. Today’s events wouldn’t have happened.

Now that Head Instructor Shen had inquired about the current situation, Liang Ping couldn’t stop it. He could only pray in his heart and hope that He Yan would have good luck and be safe and sound.

—

Cheng Lisu stayed in Xiao Jue’s room, painting peach charms on the little table. His uncle was reading a book sent from the capital and Cheng Lisu didn’t know the contents of the book. Xiao Jue has been reading it all morning.

Cheng Lisu felt bored. He was thinking about whether to go out and look at the area to find some entertainment for himself. There was a sudden knock on the door from outside and Xiao Jue commanded, “Come in.”

It was Shen Han who entered.

Shen Han walked to Xiao Jue’s side and whispered a few words. Cheng Lisu moved his chair to the other end and stretched his ears to eavesdrop.

“He Yan…Huang Xiong…sword…arena.”

For the first time, Cheng Lisu’s brain functioned properly. He deduced what was going on after only thinking for a moment. Someone wanted to duel with He Yan using sword fighting and he was now in the arena. His heart pumped with excitement. As expected from his elder brother, he was sparring with another person when he had just won a match yesterday. He wanted to go and see it immediately!

Cheng Lisu stealthy put down the pen and paper in his hand. Winking at Shen Han, he attempted to tiptoe out of the room whilst Xiao Jue had his back turned to him.

Before he could reach the door, Xiao Jue said softly, “Cheng Lisu.”

“…” Cheng Lisu answered with a sullen face. His heart felt strange. His uncle didn’t have his eyes on him. How did he get caught every time he tried to do something?

Cheng Lisu trotted up to Xiaxo Jue, squirmed, and said, “Uncle, I’ll just take a quick peek. My elder brother is sword fighting with others. How can I not watch it? I have to be loyal to He Yan. I promise I’ll come back to practice calligraphy after I finish watching. I won’t be late!”

Xiao Jue raised his eyebrows and glanced at him, “Have I forbidden you from watching?”

“Huh?” Cheng Lisu widened his eyes and smiled, “If you’re letting me watch, why don’t you say it earlier! Then I’ll get going!”

He turned and when he was about to run, Xiao Jue warned him, “Slow down.”

Cheng Lisu looked at him suspiciously.

The latter stood up and walked out with Shen Han, “I will go too.”

Cheng Lisu was dumbfounded.

“Doesn’t your elder brother want to enter the Nine Banners Battalion?” The corner of the young man’s lips was hooked, “I’m also curious as to how he plans to enter the Nine Banners Battalion.”

# Chapter 60: Mandarin Duck Swords

He Yan pondered seriously in front of the weapons rack by the high platform of the arena.

She hadn’t practised with swords much in the past as it was a bit inconvenient. Most of the swords on the weapons rack were willow leaf swords and large ring swords, which weren’t very practical for her. She thought for a long time before reaching for one of the lowermost knives on the rack.

The recruits were stunned at the sight of it.

Some who didn’t understand asked, “Why is this sword so small? It doesn’t even reach the length of a human arm.”

Jiang Jiao explained as he was knowledgeable, “This is a mandarin duck sword. They come in pairs.”

The mandarin duck swords were indeed small; the same length as a forearm. The two swords were enclosed in the same sheath so they could be hidden in sleeves or boots. The blade was wide and thick, its length was only a few inches long from the front of the tip. This made it convenient for backhanded and defensive movements.

He Yan slowly drew the swords out of the sheath. One was a little longer than the other. Since the other was slightly shorter, this indicated the rarity of these swords being used.

*Not bad*, she praised in her heart. She casually played around with the swords, testing them.

Wang Ba came down to the stage and was startled when he saw the mandarin duck swords in He Yan’s hands, “Is he actually going to use the mandarin duck swords?”

Huang Xiong, who was on stage, was equally confused. After seeing He Yan choose those swords, his perspective of He Yan had changed in his mind, “Double swords?”

He Yan nodded, “Double swords.”

“I didn’t expect you to know how to wield double swords at such a young age,” Huang Xiong said, “Sure enough, everything’s possible!”

He Yan humbly replied, “It’s all because of life experiences.”

The crowd at the bottom didn’t like the sound of it.

Du Mao stretched out and patted Liang Ping, “What exactly does He Yan’s family do? How can he be that good at martial arts? What kind of life experience forced him to do this? Had he been abducted from the streets as a child and forced to sell his art?”

“Who am I going to ask if you ask me?” Liang Piao was irritated. How does He Yan know how to wield mandarin duck swords? Seriously, what decent family would train their children to fight with mandarin duck swords? These swords were mostly used by the Green Forest people!

*Who the hell is this guy?*

Without saying anything more, Huang Xiong slowly pulled out his long sword from its sheath and nodded slightly at He Yan, “Brother He, please enlighten me.”

*How could she be called a ‘brother’?* She wailed in her heart.

Even if she was a 19-year-old in her previous life, she was still too young to be called a ‘brother’ by Huang Xiong. She should be calling Huang Xiong ‘uncle’ instead. Now that Cheng Lisu calls her ‘elder brother’, she should be calling Xiao Jue ‘uncle’ as well. But, if she calls Xiao Jue an uncle, how could she call Huang Xiong ‘elder brother’?

Huang Xiong was old enough to be Xiao Jue’s father!

As she was thinking this, Mak exclaimed, “Brother He, be careful!”, but Huang Xiong had already rushed over with his sword.

The man danced ferociously like a tiger with his golden-backed sword. He slanted the tip of the sword across the left side, shifted his right foot slightly, turned around and slashed at He Yan.

He Yan bluffed. She crouched down to avoid the attack and used her backhand to split the tip of the blade. Golden-backed sword in the front and the mandarin duck swords in the back.

Huang Xiong’s brute force was so strong that he swung He Yan’s sword away but He Yan was already aiming at him and had thrown the sword at him. Huang Xiong turned his head to avoid it just as He Yan raised her hand to grab hold of the sword that had just been thrown. The two of them were frozen, staring at each other.

Huang Xiong was not Jiang Jiao. Jiang Jiao was still young after all. Huang Xiong’s sword had been with him for thirty years, so the man and his sword had already formed a deep bond. When they fought, He Yan had already learned that this man’s skills were better than hers.

She must fight quickly or else she’d have to admit her loss. He Yan calculated.

Huang Xiong’s heart was in knots. He had fought hundreds of people over the years, both good and bad. But how old was this young man? He had just thrown a sword with one hand and caught it with the other. How did he do it? Had he been playing with swords since the age of three?

To He Yan, Huang Xiong was a burly figure, the swordsmanship of his was both fierce yet clumsy, and he lacked flexibility. It seemed that she made the right decision of choosing mandarin duck swords. She can now break the ‘fast’ rule.

Her eyes moved and she snapped, “Continue!”

And then she ran at him at the speed of lightning.

Huang Xiong gripped his sword in his right hand, diagonally stepped to the left and stabbed straight at He Yan with a single strike.

He Yan also struck at him at the same time. Although she looked thin, her strength was not weak. The two swords were stuck together but He Yan still had an extra sword. She bent her elbow and raised the back of her sword to her head and stabbed Huang Xiong.

Huang Xiong could not dodge. A corner of his clothes was cut off. There was a sudden scream from the crowd.

From this moment, the crowd noticed that He Yan’s movements became more rapid.

Her footwork was extremely flexible. One of her swords were wrapped around Huang Xiong’s golden-backed dagger, whilst the other was waiting for an opportunity. Although Huang Xiong had never stabbed her, he was no longer able to take advantage of her. The single blade was fierce, but the double blade swords were dexterous.

Using softness to conquer strength so that the weak could defeat the strong.

“Earlier you asked me to enlighten you. I remember that we have a Record of Arms for Dual Swords,” She casually spoke, “I’ll dictate it to you.”

Huang Xiong was stunned. She slung a sharp word back at him in a snitch.

“The new moon breeze gave birth to two arms of weapon, the left and right are used as one.” She held long swords on both left and right hand, her posture valiant.

“The two arms were dazzling as they entwined in front of the eyes. Later, Yu Yuyang received the solitary sword.” The long swords danced, making it difficult to see the youth’s appearance. Only his loud voice could be heard.

“Only the hand alone was quick as lightning. I have already entered the shooting stance.”

With every step, He Yan pressured Huang Xiong.

“But I know the sword in the past was not complete, so there’s no point in using both left and right.” The sword swept towards Huang Xiong’s neck but he narrowly avoided it.

“Today, I used the right sword to defend with the appropriate swordsmanship, but I used the left one to attack.” She used both swords skillfully yet willfully. The sword was her hand and her hand was the blade.

In the arena, she fought and danced. In contrast to the unhurried clashes of the weapons, the movements were a blur.

The clanking sounds of the knives colliding with each other only made one’s heart clench with anticipation.

When Cheng Lisu came over with a few other people, this was what they saw.

“Uncle, look. I told you my big brother will win!” he exclaimed excitedly.

This exclamation drew the gaze of the surrounding people. Someone who recognized Xiao Jue immediately cried out excitedly, “It’s the General! General Xiao! General Feng Yun has come to the arena!”

General Feng Yun?

With that said, the eyes of the new recruits were drawn to Xiao Jue. The cries reached the arena.

He Yan’s ears twitched. *Xiao Jue?*

She looked sideways and saw that Xiao Jue stood next to Shen Han and Cheng Lisu not far below the arena.

The young man was wearing a dark blue veil embellished with cranes. His style was elegant and neat. With picturesque eyebrows, he looked like a mystical being that came out from a picture scroll when compared to the new recruits. Her figure was rough and crude, whilst he was like a bright moon amid clear winds. The distance between them was too far so He Yan couldn’t see his appearance. She thought that he must be looking like an indifferent flower on the vast Gaoling Mountain peak.

She didn’t expect Xiao Jue to actually come to see her compete in person. Does this mean that yesterday’s improvised match had finally reached the right people? Had Xiao Jue noticed that she had such a superb talent?

“Big brother, watch out!” Cheng Lisu’s exclamation reached her ears as she was mindlessly thinking.

When she looked up, the golden-backed sword was already ready to strike at her.

# Chapter 61: **THE ART OF WAR**

The edge of the blade was close to her face with a vague hint of blood. The scene left the audience wide-eyed and all of them gasped in alarm.

Liang Ping couldn’t help but blurt out, “Be careful!”

Swordsmanship was different from spearmanship. A spear was more dangerous than a crossbow and a sword more dangerous than a spear. If one was not careful, they would bleed. Given Huang Xiong’s strength, if He Yan couldn’t hold his sword, then he would be in trouble.

*This brat. How can he be distracted at a time like this even if he’s usually a carefree person?* Liang Ping was deeply anxious as being distracted during sword duels was a taboo!

Huang Xiong saw the opportunity and took advantage of this moment. He was about to slash at her, his sword pointing at He Yan’s neck. There was no way for He Yan to avoid it but the young man raised his head and smiled wryly.

*Damn*, Huang Xiong cursed in his heart. He had to stop. In an instant, He Yan’s sword on her left hand was on top of his long sword and the sword on her right hand was behind him. In a panic, Huang Xiong bent down to avoid. He saw the boy’s smile widen and his mandarin duck swords made a single cut, slashing Huang Xiong’s head straight. Huang Xiong wanted to reach his hand out to block it but he was already a step too late.

The blades stopped in front of his forehead. However, due to the ferocious force behind the strike, a small wound was inflicted on his forehead. And a fresh line of blood began to draw.

The audience was silent.

After a long while, He Yan put away the sword at her side and took out a crumpled handkerchief. She handed it to him, “Here.”

Huang Xiong looked at He Yan’s handkerchief without accepting it, “Just now, you weren’t distracted? Were you trying to deceive me?”

“Soldiers aren’t afraid of deception,” He Yan smiled, “What do you think?”

She had been in this line of field for so many years. Of course, she knew that nothing should be taken lightly and she should’ve been even more focused during competitions. She shouldn’t be swayed even if the emperor came, not to mention Xiao Jue. Huang Xiong’s sword technique was superb unlike her, so how could she win easily if she didn’t deploy some tricks? So, she deliberately made a ploy to lure Huang Xiong to take the bait like when a mantis catches the cicada but had an Oriole on its back. [1]

With that said, she was quite smart. Xiao Jue would have never thought that the ‘stupid’ person he evaluated at that time would be so quick-witted. When she thought of this, He Yan proudly looked down at the stage to see if Xiao Jue was looking at her with admiration. Who knew that there was no trace of Xiao Jue. Not even Shen Han was there. Except for Cheng Lisu, who waved at her excitedly.

*Did he just leave like that?* He Yan was dumbfounded.

*Did he actually see her win?*

Before she could figure this out, there was a huge crowd of people hailing around her. Half of the new recruits were completely impressed by her. Her crossbow, spear and swordsmanship were so exquisite that they thought the young man was worthy of praise. However, the other half was even more off-putted by her arrogance and muttered, “It’s not righteous to only use schemes and tricks. If you have the ability, you should fight people in an upright manner. It’s precisely because someone’s inferior to their opponents that they would turn to deception.”

“That only shows that people are smart!” someone sneered.

Wang Ba walked out from the crowd with mixed feelings. On one hand, he hoped that He Yan would keep winning to show that He Yan was truly a strong man. It was understandable that he lost at the hands of a strong opponent. After all, no one in the entire Liang Zhou Guards could beat him.

On the other hand, Wang Ba was very unhappy that he was the only one who had to call him ‘boss’ despite so many people having lost to He Yan.

Why?

When he thought about it, Huang Xiong was over forty years old. Having lost to the hands of a sixteen-year-old boy seemed a bit worse than his situation. Thinking about this, Wang Ba’s heart settled down. He temporarily let out a sigh.

……

Two people were walking leisurely in the woods under the Bai Yue Mountain.

The vegetation was dense and the shade from the sun made the surroundings cool and refreshing. There were also birds chirping, and the scenery alone was unique to Bai Yue Mountain.

“You just saw the arena competition,” Xiao Jue said, “What did you think?”

Shen Han thought about it carefully before he said, “Liang Ping has recruited a good soldier and He Yan is a good seedling. He is a rare talent who can wield a crossbow, spear and a sword. It’s not easy for him to do so and I can’t find another one in this group of new recruits from Liang Zhou.”

“How was his sword technique?” Xiao Jue enquired again.

“He Yan’s sword skills were not as skilled and subtle as Huang Xiong’s, but he was more clever with his footwork, had critical thinking skills and knew how to apply deception into his duel.” Shen Han replied.

He Yan’s shortcomings were very obvious. If the match dragged on for another minute, He Yan would definitely be outplayed. He probably knew this himself, so he pretended to be distracted. Huang Xiong fell right into the trap by making an impulsive move. He Yan was able to gain an advantage at the end and defeat him instead.

“What do you think about recruiting him into the Nine Banners Battalion?” Xiao Jue said thoughtlessly.

“This young man is resourceful and not overly courageous. He is also skilled with a bow and horse, has excellent martial art skills and is said to be literate. If you are looking for someone from this group of new recruits, he should be the best choice.” Shen Han replied cautiously.

“You think so too?” Xiao Jue turned around, his tone undisputed.

When Shen Han observed the youth’s face, the Xiao family’s young general looked strangely stoic at the moment when he had always been happy or angry. Shen Han couldn’t perceive his thoughts but felt that he didn’t seem to agree with his opinions.

“General….do you think there’s something wrong with him?” Xiao Jue slowly drew out the words, “There is something wrong with this person.”

Shen Han was stunned.

“He was not very skilled in the sword competition today but the footwork he used could only be of someone who had trained in the Assault Battalion Infantry.”

When the infantrymen of the Assault Battalion enter the battlefield, they would always be in the frontline. Their footwork had to be extremely flexible because of their high chances of being killed. When He Yan and Huang Xiong duelled, he was not as skilled as Huang Xiong but He Yan dodged every single attack from him. Xiao Jue knew that the subconscious retreating and dodging were skills honed at the Assault Battalion. He Yan probably noticed it himself. He deliberately changed his ways to avoid being discovered. However, muscle memory was difficult to change.

“This….this….” Shen Han stuttered, “How is this possible? He’s only sixteen. Has he been to war before?”

“It’s precisely impossible that makes him problematic.” Xiao Jue said.

Now that the conversation was tense, Shen Han must be cautious. He hesitated and asked, “General, what should we do now?”

“I’m going to test this man.” Xiao Jue replied.

“How does General Xiao plan to test him?”

“Didn’t he set up a ring arena? One game a day and he swore to win every game? Tomorrow, you will pick three instructors to compete with him in a mounted archery contest.”

Shen Han was startled and hesitated for a moment, “Is that a good idea? If he wins….”

If He Yan wins, how will the recruits see their instructors?

Xiao Jue stopped and faintly said, “If he wins, there must clearly be something wrong with him”

“There won’t be such a genius in the world. Even if there were, he wouldn’t appear as a Liang Zhou Guard.”

[1] It satirizes those who only care about their immediate interests and ignore the disasters behind them; warns against those who are short-sighted, stunned, and ignorant of future troubles.

# Chapter 62: **TEAMING UP FOR A COMPETITION**

Until midnight, He Yan was surrounded by new recruits who came to befriend her and she promised to teach them swordplay. She didn’t plan to train at night because it was too late today.

Mak laid facing her, one hand rested on the back of his head, his eyes shone brightly as he said to her, “Ah He was so awesome today.”

“Tell me,” He Yan said after a moment, “Did General Xiao actually watch my entire sword duel with Uncle Huang today?”

She was still thinking about Xiao Jue’s appearance at the match but Xiao Jue left halfway through her exquisite swordplay. Wouldn’t it be a waste of her efforts? Or did Xiao Jue think that her swordsmanship was so mediocre that it wasn’t worth paying attention to?

“Huh?” Mak didn’t think that He Yan would ask this. He tried to remember before saying, “The General came for a while then left. You were so nervous at the last moment of your duel that we all focused on watching you. We didn’t see when the general left. The General should’ve….watched everything, right?”

He Yan turned over anxiously.

“Ah He, did you really want the General to see the whole fight?” Mak asked.

“Naturally, I wanted to be a martial artist and sell my skills to the emperor and his family. At any rate, in order to sell it first, he has to notice it. If he doesn’t pay the slightest attention, how could he know that I’m number one in Liang Zhou?”

Hong Shan said slowly, “Now that your reputation as the number one Liang Zhou soldier has reached far and wide, don’t worry, there will be people looking for you to compete in this and that in the future. There will be countless opportunities for this and there will always be chances for the General to notice your skills.”

*That’s good*, He Yan thought to herself, closing her eyes.

….

Hong Shan was right. The next morning, Liang Ping walked up to He Yan just after the weight-loaded run and before she had time to practice her crossbow at the arena, “Come over here.”

He Yan, confused, followed him. When she arrived at the long road behind the arena, she saw two other men with three horses coming to the arena. They were both instructors of the Liang Zhou Guards. One of them was Du Mao, who often came to converse with Liang Ping. The other was a short, old man with white hair called Ma Da Mei.

“Instructor Liang, this is….” He Yan was puzzled. Was she so good that they’re recruiting her as an instructor? How could recruits be instructors? That’s not how you get promoted and she didn’t want to be an instructor.

Fortunately, Liang Ping’s words relieved her, “Didn’t you say on the stage the day before yesterday that you will take on any challenge in Liang Zhou and you will win every challenge?”

Although He Yan didn’t understand what he meant, she nodded, “Yes.”

“Today, the three of us will compete with you in a riding contest.” Du Mao took a step forward and handed the reins of the horse over to He Yan, “Let’s compete now!”

“Huh?” He Yan was surprised, “You want to compete with me?”

She became a ringmaster to make a name for herself amongst the recruits but she never thought of competing with the instructors. What’s in it for these trainers? They aren’t young men so why would they want to compete with her? Could there be a conspiracy?

When her cautious gaze fell on these people, the thin old man, Ma Da Mei smiled, “What’s wrong, young man? Are you afraid to compete with your instructors? I thought you were braver than that. Did we scare you?”

When Ma Da Mei smiled, there were wrinkles all over his face. They weren’t ugly but gave off a kind demeanour, like her own parents’. It’s just that He Yan also knew that this person was not as kind on the surface and every word she just heard was meant to stir the pot. If she really chose to not compete with them, she would become infamous for being timid and fearful. People like Xiao Jue who couldn’t tolerate sand in their eyes would never recruit her into the Nine Banners Battalion.

Thinking of this, she smiled cheerfully, “How could that be? I just don’t want to be embarrassed in front of all the instructors. I was just hesitating. If you’re willing to teach me, I dare not be ungrateful. Let’s compete. Just one match.”

Liang Ping and the two other people looked at each other and nodded, “Good!”

He Yan was now becoming a celebrity in Liang Zhou. Whenever there was a new rumour about her, everyone would know of it. As soon as the three instructors announced a riding competition with He Yan, all of the new recruits went crazy and wanted to watch. However, they were all stopped by their own instructors who demanded them to remain in the arena to train.

Of course, this was Shen Han’s arrangement. Although Xiao Jue only said that he wanted to test He Yan, he couldn’t bet on the reputations of all of the instructors. If He Yan won, would the new recruits obey He Yan or their instructors? It’s hard to say.

Therefore, it’s better to hide it than display it.

The new recruits couldn’t go and be entertained and neither could Cheng Li Su. He was locked up in his room in the Liang Zhou guardhouse. He couldn’t escape as there were guards stationed outside.

He didn’t know that He Yan was going to compete in a mounted archery competition. Suddenly, he thought that something had happened to the Liang Zhou guards as he was locked up and pounded on the door, “What happened? Is there an army riot? Why won’t you let me out? Uncle, why did you lock me up?”

The guard’s emotionless voice replied, “Master Cheng, the General said that you have to finish copying the Selected Works of Zhao Ming three times before you can go out.”

“I see that you want me dead! Why don’t you just kill me?” Cheng Li Su sat down at the table in a fury. Three times! That would take more than a month to finish copying!

Shen Han and Xiao Jue were walking outside.

Shen Han looked behind him, “Master Cheng is very fond of He Yan. If there is really something wrong with He Yan, could he have another motive for approaching Master Cheng?”

“Most likely,” Xiao Jue agreed, “It was Cheng Li Su who told him about the Nine Banners Battalion.”

Shen Han was silent. After a while, he replied, “If that’s the case, this would be really bad.”

There were people with ulterior motives mixed in with the new recruits. If He Yan was one of them, he would never be the only one. If there were others, they were very passive with their intentions. If Xiao Jue hadn’t been there this time and observed the difference between He Yan and the other recruits, then the entirety of the Liang Zhou Guards would’ve been in the palm of someone else’s hand.

Whilst conversing, they had already reached the roadside of the arena. The four of them were standing at the end of the road, each on their horses. The first was Liang Ping, then Du Mao, Ma Da Mei and finally He Yan.

He Yan was at the sidelines and her horse was the smallest. She turned over on her horse and looked skilful. She held onto the reins whilst carrying a longbow with the quiver of arrows on her back. He Yan looked courageous unlike her appearance of a feeble young man.

She didn’t wear a riding suit. The sunlight shone on her scarlet outfit as her beautiful eyebrows and eyes were glazed with a unique heroic spirit. The smile on her lips and the demeanour of He Yan sitting on a horse were identical to a young general.

Shen Han sneaked a glance at Xiao Jue, who looked stoic and indifferent, not knowing what he was thinking.

In this split second, Shen Han saw a resemblance between Xiao Jue and He Yan.

# Chapter 63: No More Archery

“Instructor Liang, you still haven’t told me how one wins the mounted archery competition,”

He Yan looked at Liang Ping who was beside her, “Are we looking at the number of prey or who reaches the end of the stables first?”

Liang Ping had not yet spoken, but Ma Da mei had beaten him to it. He smiled, “Young man, we will run a lap here whilst an incense stick is left to burn. This will be the starting and endpoint of the race. The four of us have different feathers on the arrows, so we’ll be shooting targets at the bend. Whosoever returns first after shooting the arrows will win.”

After hearing this, He Yan nodded her head in agreement, “Okay.”

Liang Ping couldn’t help but look at her. The most this young man said was ‘okay’. It was the same ‘okay’ that was said to Wang Ba, Jiang Jiao and Huang Xiong. And now, even to the instructors, he still replied with the same answer. He didn’t know when he would hear He Yan reply with a ‘no’.

“Then, let’s begin.”

As soon as Du Mao pulled the reins, a horn blew behind him, and the four horses scampered out of the way like arrows, leaving only smoke and dust in the blink of an eye.

The horse that He Yan rode was much well-behaved than the horse that He Sui brought to her in the school field back in the capital. It should’ve been specially trained and tamed. The horse understood her instructions with the small number of commands she gave. She also noticed that, from the three instructors, Liang Ping and Du Mao were good at horse riding but were not close to the astonishing Ma Da Mei. Ma Da Mei’s horse-handling skills were as good as her own, perhaps even better, but he didn’t show it.

She was overserving these three people, but the instructors were also observing her. Du Mao looked over at her and almost didn’t take his eyes off her head.

She wrapped the whip diagonally around her arm, commanding the horse to gallop in the desired direction. As she patted it lightly with her hand, she made Du Mao think. He Yan was not a son or a young master from the capital city who happened to cruise around. What did he mean by that?

The most surprising aspect was her casual attitude towards everything. She wasn’t left behind by any of the instructors, and she even had the heart to smile at him.

Du Mao looked away immediately.

The horse ran like a meteor. In the blink of an eye, it had reached the bend. He Yan touched the quiver behind her back and took out a few arrows to shoot at the straw targets on both sides.

The target was not as big as the ones at the other end of the arena; it was as small as a palm- unobvious to the eye and easy to miss. When He Yan was about to shoot, Liang Ping and Du mao looked at each other. One horse after the other caught up beside He Yan, each squeezing He Yan’s horse in the middle. The arrow in her hand disappeared, rendering her unable to shoot.

The horse was frightened. He Yan jolted a few times and pulled the reins to stabilize herself. She looked towards Liang Ping and Du Mao who were shooting arrows with their bows as if nothing had happened. Du Mao even had the gall to say to her, “He Yan, be careful! Don’t fall down!”

As if they weren’t the ones playing dirty!

He Yan raised her eyebrows. To be honest, she never knew how to forgive in a competition. How could she let go of the fact that her archery was disrupted?

Liang Ping and Du Mao had already shot their arrows but a green arrow sprang out from the slash with a thud. Their arrows split in half and landed on the ground in a different direction.

The two of them looked at He Yan at the same time. He Yan shrugged her shoulders, “Instructor, why are your archery skills so poor?”

Liang Ping was mute.

This young man was so arrogant that he could not forgive him.

The old man, Ma Da Mei, had already caught up with her from behind, smiling, “Young man, there’s no need to hurry. Take it easy.”

Wherever she moved, the three men would follow her from the back, front or sides- pressuring her as if nothing had happened. Her horse was frequently frightened due to which she couldn’t aim at the bullseye.

After trying so many times, she realized that the three instructors were deliberately against her. Although she didn’t understand why, it was probably part of the competition. They wanted her to miss every shot so that even if she finished the track first, she wouldn’t win.

She was outnumbered. It was an archery competition so she couldn’t fight the instructors. But to let it go like it was nothing was not something she could do.

Her eyes moved slightly and murmured, “Trying to trick me? No way.”

She suddenly raised her arm and the horsewhip that was wrapped around her arm spread out, falling into the wind with a crisp sound.

Du Mao frowned, “What is he doing?”

From the beginning to end, He Yan did not use the horsewhip. It was indeed rare that a whip was not used. But now that He Yan unravelled the whip. Was it because she couldn’t hold on and was going to use the whip while riding?

The moment he saw the horsewhip fly towards him, Du Mao was shocked. He dodged the attack.

The horsewhip didn’t hit Du Mao but curled up in a whorl and rolled the handful of arrows in the quiver. He Yan stretched out the whips again, releasing the whip in mid-air. The feather arrows fell in the wind.

Liang Ping, who witnessed the whole process was stunned, but before he knew it, He Yan’s whip was already aimed at him. He was taken aback and hurriedly rode his horse to avoid him. However, this time, it was He Yan’s turn to attack. Where could he run? With a pull, all the arrows in his quiver were thrown to the ground.

“He Yan!” Du Mao was livid.

“I think the instructors don’t want me to shoot,” He Yan smiled as if she hadn’t seen his ugly expression, “But I don’t want to lose either. So I have no choice but to prevent anyone else from shooting.”

“Hahaha!” Behind him was Ma Da Mei’s laughter. He was not the least bit nervous or angry. Instead, he was in high spirits, “This young man is quite smart. I don’t know if you can accept this arrow of mine or not.”

The corner of He Yan’s lips raised slightly, “How can I? I’m not going to take your arrows.”

Ma Da Mei’s equestrian skills were superb. It was tough to make contact, but it didn’t matter. As long as he had no target to shoot at after the bend, he would have to compete with her to determine who would reach the end first.

She and Ma Da Mei went head to head. She shot arrows, and Ma Da Mei shot to block them. Ma Da Mei shot arrows, and He Yan copied his movements to take them down. During this time, they had already left Liang Ping and Du Mao behind.

They were in a stalemate, so they made the last turn. No one was able to hit the target. The remaining competitors had to focus on the race to reach the finish line.

Ma Da Mei amusingly looked at He Yan, “Young man, you’re really good.” He swung his whip, and the horse sprinted in the air effortlessly.

He Yan looked at his back and praised, “It’s really true. There are lots of strong people under the vast sky.”

Clenching the reins tightly, she followed suit.

# Chapter 64: **All the Commitments**

The horses ran as swift as lightning. With the wind carrying their hooves, the horses galloped straight to the finish line.

It was hard to tell who would reach the finish line first between He Yan and Ma Da Mei.

Liang Ping and Du Mao had already given up. They knew they were not as good as the two in front of them and knew they would not be able to keep up with them. They had already done what Chief Instructor Shen asked them to do, so they simply wandered around the course.

Chief Instructor Shen had called them out last night and asked them to compete with He Yan. At first, Liang Ping and Du Mao refused- they weren’t recruits, why would they bother competing with He Yan. However, the Chief Instructor insisted that they do as they were told and commanded them to create as much trouble as possible for He Yan during the competition.

Liang Ping had a bad feeling. He had to compete with He Yan and had to purposely make him lose. Was this not unfair? Their head Instructor was more like a bully to the recruits. On top of that, the three of them had to work together to deal with He Yan, which was oppressive.

Among the three of them, Ma Da Mei was the best equestrian. Liang Ping wondered how good He Yan would be compared to him.

In the distance, they could see the red silk cloth on the flagpole at the end.

She was determined to cross the finish line, but at that moment, Ma Da Mei shouted, “Little one!”

He Yan’s eyes flickered towards him and saw the little old man stand up half-right; two feet steadily on the back of the horse. She was impressed. Then, the old man grinned at her as he turned over and swept towards He Yan.

He Yan was shocked and pulled the reins to avoid crashing into the old man. The old man was like a bat with flying wings. Half of his body was already hanging onto He Yan’s horse. He even deflated his mouth and accused He Yan of steering her horse to avoid the action.

“Young man, how can you be so unkind at such a young age? Do you want me to fall to my death?”

He Yan wanted to squeeze him down, but the man had already occupied the magpie’s nest. He firmly held the reins as he came towards He Yan, attempting to hit her palm and beat her down.

This person… How confident was he that nothing would happen to her if she fell? Anxiety arose in He Yan as she fought two moves with him. Neither had any advantage.

Ma Da Mei was also surprised. Liang Zhou Guards had dozens of instructors, each with their forte. Some were good with bows and crossbows, some were good at defending cities, and he was the best equestrian amongst all of the instructors. When Shen Han asked him to compete with He Yan yesterday, he thought that Shen Han was crazy at first. Now, it seemed that this young man called He Yan had greatly exceeded his expectations.

He was an exquisite rider – dexterous and decisive as well. Knowing that it would be hard to hit the grass targets with the three of them pestering like flies, he knocked out all of his competitors’ arrows. At this moment, the two moves they fought weren’t chaotic at all. It’s as if he had experience fighting opponents in critical situations. The youngster looked calm.

He Yan was not as calm as she appeared. The instructors of the Liang Zhou Guards weren’t people who knew how to eat and do nothing, but this old man was really difficult to deal with. Seeing that she was close to the finishing line, her goal was not to fight but to cross the finishing line first. Logically, if she and the old man were on the same horse and her horse crossed the line first, who would be the winner?

What treachery.

She looked up smiling without a hint of displeasure, “I’m young, but I know how to respect my elders. You are so old and still riding with me. If you fall, I really cannot be blamed for your death. I’d better change horses.”

As she said that, she leaned out, grabbing the iron ring on the saddle with her two hands, leaning her body between the two horses.

The moment was really beautiful. Ma Da Mei couldn’t help but see a halo of bright light around He Yan using one hand to grab the iron ring and the other catching Ma Da Mei’s horse with a whip. When the two horses came closer, He Yan let go of her hand. Her body nimbly leapt onto the other horse, grabbed the reins and turned over to sit on it.

“Good! Good! Good!” Ma Da Mei’s eyes shone with admiration, but he laughed and said, “You’re still too naive if you think you can win like this.”

Before his words fell, the horse underneath He Yan struggled violently on the same spot, refusing to gallop forward.

“This is my horse. It only recognizes me as his master, young man. You have good horsemanship, but you can’t control this lord’s horse.”

He laughed loudly as if He Yan’s actions fell right into his schemes. It was just what he wanted – to embarrass He Yan.

The young boy smiled faintly. His voice was not the least bit nervous. Instead, he replied calmly, “I’d rather give it a try, just in case I can manage it.”

She leaned down, her lips close to the horse’s ear. They didn’t know what she was muttering, but the horse underneath her gradually became serene after some tossing and turning.

Ma Da Mei was stunned. He couldn’t believe his eyes. He’d seen thousands of horses and was able to give simple instructions to them but he’d never seen a horse become obedient to a new master after listening to a few bits and bobs. There were ancient myths and legends about some people knowing every language of every beast. Is He Yan one of those people?

He had lived such a long life but he has never believed in any legends of gods or ghosts.

The young man pulled the ruins and the horse galloped away. Ma Da Mei hurried to follow but in his daze, he had already missed the best opportunity to win the race. The young man’s arrogant words were still ringing in his ears, “Instructor, your chance to win against me has just ended!”

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At the end of the racecourse, Shen Han and Xiao Jue observed the race from a nearby pavilion.

Shen Han did not drink the tea in his cup, but Xiao Jue had already drunk half of his tea. The fight between He Yan and Ma Da mei was already in full view just now.

Shen Han shut his eyes. A chill rose in his heart.

Xiao Jue was right. In the Liang Zhou Guards, there couldn’t be such a genius. To be the best at everything and to even win against all of his instructors? This wasn’t a good thing at all. It’s a bit too strange. It’s as if….He Yan was specifically placed in the Liang Zhou Guards.

Red silk fluttered in the wind. The teenager rode the stallion like a hero, sweeping across the course till the end. He reined his horse to a stop as smoke billowed up, followed by Ma Da Mei with a grim expression.

The two came to a halt one after the other.

He Yan dismounted first, followed by Ma Da mei. She walked towards Ma Da Mei, “I didn’t mean to tease Instructor Ma just now, but I was forced to do so in the situation. Instructor Ma wouldn’t hold this against me, right?”

The young man looked anxious.

Ma Da Mei was stunned for a moment but broke out a smile afterwards, “Of course not, young man. It’s natural to compete to the best of one’s ability.”

She wiped the sweat off her forehead and thought for a moment, “Then this time, I’ll let you do the same.”

In other words, she had won again.

# Chapter 6: Suspicion

Liang Ping and Du Mao rushed forward. The two of them dismounted at the end of the line and saw He Yan joyfully quenching her thirst whilst Ma Da Mei pondered.

This didn’t seem like Ma Da Mei had won.

The two of them thought to themselves: No way. How could Ma Da Mei lose to He Yan?

Liang Ping went to Ma Da Mei. Without hesitation, Ma Da Mei admitted, “I lost.”

Did he really lose?

Liang Ping was surprised, “How could that be? How could you lose to him?”

Ma Da Mei was the best equestrian among all of the instructors. If Ma Da Mei couldn’t beat He Yan, wouldn’t that mean that there was no equestrian better than He Yan in the entire Liang Zhou Guards? Then, what archery or equestrian skills could they still teach He Yan when he could be his own instructor?

“Did that kid cheat?” Du Mao whispered, “Did you fall for his tricks?”

Du Mao was really angry when he thought about how He Yan threw away his arrows with a roll of his horsewhip. Looking at this, was this something that recruits could do?

Ma Da Mei glared at him, “I’m not as good as I was before, okay? He tottered to He Yan’s side, asking, “Little doll, I have something to ask you.”

“Does the instructor want to ask what I said to your horse to make it obedient?” He Yan tightened the cap of her water bag, “If the head instructor wants to ask about this matter, then forget it. It’s an ancestral craft, it cannot be told to outsiders.”

She winked at Ma Da Mei and turned to Liang Ping, “Instructor Liang, if there’s nothing else, I’ll leave first. I still have to train at the martial arts arena.”

Liang Ping dismissed her with a wave of his hand but she was already out of his sight.

Du Mao looked at her retreating figure, still somewhat dismayed, “He ran all this time but still has the energy and strength to do further training at the martial arts arena. What kind of person is this?”

“He Yan is different from you and I.” Liang Ping replied irritatedly.

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“General, look at this joke.” Shen Han embarrassingly exclaimed. All of his instructors lost to He Yan despite the tactic used. It was a bit unreasonable.

“That doesn’t matter. You did a good job,” Xiao Jue lowered his eyes and drank his tea, “The riding and archery test wasn’t initiated to put He Yan in his place, but rather, to observe him.”

“Does the general still think there’s something wrong with him?” Shen Han asked.

“Yes.”

“Was it because He Yan was too outstanding?”

If it was because of that, this could only be considered a suspicion. After all, there was no evidence.

“The last move he made at the end to calm down the horse originated from barbarians.” Xiao Jue placed the teacup down from his hands.

“Barbarians?” Shen Han stood up in an instant.

The Southern Barbarians were from Western Qiang, or the present-day Utoh Kingdom. Back then, the Western Qiang Rebellion was put down by General Fei Hong (He Yan in her previous life) and the Southern Barbarians were personally expelled by Xiao Jue. Now it seemed like the Utoh people were on the move. The barbarians and the Wei people had always been equal in strength, but even the Western Qiang Kingdom were on a delicate thread with the Southern Barbarians. They did not dare to be bold.

“Could he be a barbarian?”

“Not necessarily,” Xiao Jue shook his head, “Have you brought the military register?”

Shen Han presented the register, “Here is He Yan’s.”

“Since this person is suspicious, don’t startle the snake. Pay attention to his every move and act cautiously.”

“What is the general trying to do?”

“Put a long line to catch a big fish. It’s important to catch the fish from behind.” He replied unhurriedly.

After Shen Han left, Xiao Jue flipped through the military register and lingered on He Yan’s page for a long time.

“Fei Niu.” Xiao Jue called out.

A mysterious figure as silent as a shadow appeared behind him and whispered, “Young master.”

“Have someone check if there is a son named He Yan in Commander He’s family at the Capital City Gate.”

Fei Niu accepted the order and was about to leave when Xiao Jue gave another command, “Check if the He family has any secret dealings with Xu Jing Fu.”

…..

When He Yan returned to the martial arts arena, a large group of people gathered around. They had been eagerly waiting for a long time.

“Well, well. What’s the result?”

“Why don’t I see the head instructors? Did you win or did the instructors win?”

He Yan cheekily smiled, “It’s a secret.”

The answer did not satisfy everyone’s curiosity but He Yan was so tight-lipped that they could not pry it open. The crowd left resentfully, speculating and discussing on their own.

“It should be a win right? He Yan doesn’t look like he lost.” Said the people who believed in her.

“Since he’s won, why didn’t he say it openly? If he didn’t say it, he must’ve lost and was afraid of losing face.”

Those words were said by those who didn’t believe in her.

“You can’t argue with each other. You can always ask the instructors if He Yan won’t talk.” The people who were neutral to the situation replied.

When the instructors came, they were swarmed by the recruits. Several instructors were confused initially but when they were asked about the results of the competition, they stared at He Yan. This kid was still kind and knew when to leave some face for the instructors.

The instructors waved their hands, “Don’t be nosy. Scatter, scatter!”

No one got a satisfactory answer.

Mak was still thinking about the results when He Yan collapsed at bedtime, “Ah He, how did the competition turn out?”

“The results are not important,” He Yan patted Mak’s head, “The point is that I’m going to bed now.”

She rolled over and faced the wall, the back of her head faced Mak. Mak could only give up in inquiries.

He Yan could not sleep. Her mind kept wandering on what happened at the racecourse earlier today. In any case, the three instructors insisted on a riding competition out of nowhere which was too strange. The three of them teamed up against her.

If she was an ordinary recruit, she would not be able to stand up to them. However, they did not seem to consider whether she was a match to compete with them. It was not a kick-off but rather like a… test or confirmation of some sort.

The art of horse taming she learned came from a barbarian captive when she was in the army. The captive specialized in horse taming and his skills were out of this world. So, she ate a lot of bitterness at the time.

After He Yan captured him, the man was greedy for life and feared death, so he wrote down his clan’s precious horse-taming skills and gave them to He Yan.

Even then, this kind of horse taming skill was too complex and He Yan was only able to scratch the surface. No matter, it was enough to calm down normal horses. If she did not use this skill today, she would not have been able to win against Ma Da Mei.

On the other hand, if this was really a test, the one who could give such a command in Liang Zhou Guards could only narrow it down to the Chief Instructor or Xiao Jue. If Xiao Jue had really given this command, what was his motive? Could he be picking candidates for his Nine Banners Battalion? Was that why he had hastily ordered the Head Instructor to test her qualifications and skills?

Is this really the case? He Yan vaguely felt that she might be thinking too much outside of the box, but she really couldn’t find any other reason. After deliberating it for a while, she simply stopped thinking about it.

She would be at ease as long as she doesn’t lose the game.

# Chapter 66: Go Up to the Mountain

He Yan originally thought that if Xiao Jue called Ma Da Mei and the others to compete with her, she could prove how extraordinary she was and that could lead to something more. However, more than ten days have passed and the days spent were nothing but ordinary. Nothing else happened except for the recruits who came to occasionally challenge her. Not even daily rations were given.

Perhaps, it was just a coincidence? He Yan thought that the few instructors wanted to test out her skills because they were bored in Liang Zhou Guards.

She put the matter at the back of her mind for the time being.

After a few showers of rain, the heat seemed to have diminished a litter. Sometimes, when she got up for a run in the morning, there would be no sunshine. Instead, there would be a cool breeze. It was not long before Liang Zhou Wei’s summer would be over.

It was because of this that the recruits started to enter the mountain a few days ago.

Bai Yue Mountain was huge. It would take at least one day and night to cross the mountain. As such, the recruits were strictly forbidden to go over the mountain. At most, they were only allowed to reach the peak of the mountain. Five people would team up to patrol the mountain daily.

Hong Shan did not understand, “What’s the logic in making a five-man patrol group. If something dangerous happens, would five people be enough?”

He Yan mused. Of course, it wasn’t enough. It’s not like they want us to patrol in the first place.

The recruits stationed in Liang Zhou Guards had been training here for an entire summer. It won’t be long before they would have to ‘fight for the flag’.

‘Fight for the flag’ consisted of planting more than a dozen flags on the top of the entire mountain and then selecting teams of promising recruits to compete for them. There may be fights between the teams in the competition. When the teams finally descend, the team with the most flags wins. The final winner would most likely be stationed in the Forward Vanguard Camp.

He Yan’s goal was not to be recruited into the Forward Vanguard Camp but the Nine Banners Battalion.

Right now, permitting the recruits to enter the mountain every day was, in fact, to let them familiarize themselves with the terrain of Bai Yue Mountain. That way, when it comes to the competition, the show will be much more interesting. Normal recruits would not know this, but as someone who has been in the army, He Yan understood their intentions.

When she fought for the flag in Mo Xian county last time, the place was connected to a desert. As soon as the winds blew, the landmarks would all disappear and the dunes would change. When they were fighting for the flag, the situation was very dangerous. If it wasn’t for an elder brother who discovered a small river, no one would have been able to walk out of the desert alive.

‘Fight for the flag’ not only tested personal skills but also teamwork and cooperation between the members. It was not good to just excel at one thing. The test had high stakes for everyone. Although the actual ‘fight for the flag’ referred to a period of time in the future, the competition, in fact, had already begun. Those who are smart will pick up on the intentions and memorize the terrain when patrolling, but those who are unconscious will never pay attention to their surroundings. This will not help them in the actual competition.

“Brother Ah He, it’s your turn to go up the mountain today. Can you hunt a few rabbits with your bow and arrows? Let’s sneak them back and roast them. I haven’t tasted meat in half a month now.” Mak said while licking his lips.

“I’m not taking the crossbow,” He Yan smiled, “It’s too heavy. I’m planning on taking a knife.”

Crossbows were not suitable for close combat. If a problem arose, it would be of little use. Besides, there will always be people with crossbows in a team, so you could just borrow from them.

After seeing Mak’s sorrowful face, she comforted him, “It’s okay. In a couple of days, we can go up the mountain together and hunt as many rabbits as we’d like.”

Mak was sceptical.

He Yan could not tell him that everyone would be on the mountain when ‘fight for the flag’ starts and no instructor would be present. He might have to spend a few nights on the mountain which meant that he’d be able to eat whatever he wanted.

She tied the belt around her clothes tightly as Hong Shan said, “Then you should leave the mountain early. Let’s spend our time at the festival tonight.”

“What festival?” He yan asked with a blank expression.

“The Qi Xi Festival [1]!” Mak replied.

He Yan almost forgot that it was the seventh day of the seventh month. However, it was hilarious that a group of men would celebrate the Qi Xi festival together.

He Yan teased, “It seems like you just want to spend time with a girl you like? Do you have a girl you like?”

Hong Shan immediately retorted, “Don’t look down on people. There are so many girls who like your Shan brother a lot. If your brother wants to go to the Qi Xi festival, the girls will definitely be happy.”

“I-I don’t,” Mak also replied hastily, “But my brother has! My brother likes sister Xiao Lan from the noodle restaurant opened by Grandpa Sun in the east part of the town!”

Shi did not refute.

He Yan looked over to Shi and noticed the redness of Shi’s ears.

Mak asked again, “Brother Ah He, do you have a girl you like? What kind of girls do you like?”

He Yan causally babbled, “Good looking, smart, has excellent skills, loaded with money. Oh right, she should also be gentle, considerate, lively and interesting. It would be best if she knows how to play qin, chess, is an expert in calligraphy, painting and is a good cook.”

After He Yan left, Mak still had to digest He Yan’s words. He could only mutter in disbelief, “Brother Ah He’s requirements for his sweetheart are high….”

“Don’t listen to him spouting nonsense,” Hong Shan shook his head in disapproval, “He wants to marry a Princess Shang [2]. Mak, don’t follow his example!”

Mak nodded solemnly.

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At the practice field, He Yan took out a pair of mandarin duck swords from the weapons rack. Ever since she defeated Huang Xiong with the mandarin duck swords, there were some days where people attempted to practice with the swords. However, they were not as flexible as He Yan when practising and gave up on them after a few practice sessions. In the end, the mandarin duck swords were still mostly used by He Yan along.

When she went up the mountain today, she took the swords with her. If she wanted to make a fire and grill some fish, the swords would come in handy in hunting.

She took the swords and walked to the other side of the racecourse. The other four were ready.

These four people did not know He Yan as they were not under Instructor Liang. When one of the members saw He Yan, he smiled and pointed, “Go pick a horse and let’s go.”

He Yan nodded.

She went to the stable and picked a horse and the five of them headed up to Bai Yue Mountain.

The mountains were densely covered with trees, shading out much of the sun. The trip became much cooler and comfortable as they headed up. From time to time, hares were jumping by on both sides.

“Should we hunt some rabbits?” Someone asked.

“Let’s do it,” The recruit who greeted He Yan agreed, “Who brought the crossbow?”

Everyone looked at each other.

Perhaps the crossbow was too heavy. No one brought it with them because they might have to spend more than half a day on the mountain.

“Well, no one brought it,” A droopy-eyed recruit shrugged as he said monotonously.

He eyed He Yan, “Then, I guess we can only watch.”

Everyone knew that He Yan’s archery was superb so they expected He Yan would be carrying a crossbow.

He Yan looked back indifferently with a calm expression.

Have you got your head caught up somewhere? How audacious was he to ask General Fei Hong hunt rabbits for you. You’ve got some nerves. She thought.

[1] Qi Xi = Chinese valentine’s day

[2] To get marry as a son-in-law who stays at his wife’s home

# Chapter 67: **Not listening to people**

Rabbits cannot be hunted, foxes cannot be hunted, and birds cannot be hunted.

Nothing can be hunted, so a person can only “patrol the mountain” honestly.

Baiyue Mountain had rugged mountain roads, but the scenery was excellent. A cloud of white mist rose from the mountain stream, and emerald colors that could be seen at a glance surrounded it. The light of the spring and the clouds linger around the clothes. The peaks were twisted and stood tall as if they were in a fairyland.

The droopy-eyed guy was very clever. He took a few pieces of yellow paper with him and walked to a place. He used charcoal to draw a few steps on the yellow paper hastily. Everyone has to make a mark on the tree in any way, so as not to get lost, and don’t know how to go back down the mountain.

Because none of them brought crossbows, they walked very quietly along the way. They set off early in the morning, and after midday, they finally climbed to the top.

Everyone tied their horses to a tree, and there was a stream next to them, so they rested for a while by the stream. Only after they ate dry food and nourished themselves, could they go down the mountain and return to the guardhouse before the sun set.

The recruit who greeted He Yan was not too strong, and when he climbed to the top, he collapsed on the ground. He couldn’t wait to take out dry food  to fill his stomach, and muttered, “Finally we reached the top, I can’t walk anymore.”

He Yan washed her hands by the stream, sat down on the stone beside him, and took out the dry food.

The dry food was dry bread that was delivered in the morning. It was dry and hard. The recruit came over, took a small handful of pine nuts from his pocket, and handed it to He Yan, “Here.”

He Yan was surprised, “Where did this come from?”

“Before I came to Liangzhou Wei, my mother gave me a load. I couldn’t bear to eat it all in one go and saved it.” He was a little bit reluctant and pretended to be generous, “Try it!”

He Yan picked up a grain from his palm and peeled it off, threw it into her mouth, and said, “Very fragrant.”

“Right, right?” The child was a little happy, “My name is Shen Hong, I know you, He Yan, you were so good at the martial arts field before, no one was able to beat you.”

“It’s a fluke, just good luck.” He Yan smiled.

Shen Hong looked at the distance with some regrets, “It’s a pity that I didn’t bring a crossbow. I didn’t know that you’ll be going with us. If I knew, I would definitely bring one. Your archery skills are so good. You could’ve hit a few rabbits with a crossbow and we could have eaten roasted rabbits.”

He and Mak, she was afraid that they are not half-brothers? He Yan thought, and asked casually, “What weapon did you bring?”

Shen Hong scratched the back of his head embarrassedly, “Me? I’m not good at archery, and it’s useless to bring bows and crossbows. Swordsmanship is also ordinary, spearman ship as well… I guess I won’t be of much use, so I took a…” He took out a long stick from behind, “this.”

He Yan was speechless.

He actually brought a stick, not an iron-headed stick, but a long stick sharpened from bamboo. Are there such weapons on the weapon racks in the martial arts field? He Yan doubted that Shen Hong’s stick was really useless. Oh, unless there was a date tree here, he could use this stick to hit dates.

When he saw He Yan’s speechlessness, Shen Hong quickly remedied it, “I won’t fight people, anyway.”

He Yan nodded, “You are right.”

She and Shen Hong were on this side, Droopy eyes and the other two were sitting on the other side slightly away from them. After eating, He Yan leaned against the tree to rest for a while, and Shen Hong asked her carefully, “Well, He Yan, can I borrow your knife?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Did you see that?” Shen Hong pointed to the green leaf by the stream. The leaves were long and thin, and there was no grass. He said, “Our house runs a medicine shop. This is called Shudai Cao. It looks like ‘scallion’ but it’s not ‘scallion’. It can refresh the eyes and soothe the mind. I want to pick a little and bring it back. We will be here all day long. Maybe we will be able to use it. But the grass is extremely tough and difficult to pick. Some of them are carrying either long knives or guns, which are not as good as your knives.”

This was to use her knife as a sickle.

He Yan, “…Let’s do it.” She pulled out the mandarin duck knife around her waist and handed it to Shen Hong, saying, “Be careful.”

Shen Hong put down the stick in his hand, took the knife happily, and said to He Yan, “Thank you, I will cut more, and I will give you a handful when finished.”

He Yan wanted to say no, but then she thought about Hong Shan. Hong Shan said that he was hot and couldn’t sleep well lately. Besides, it was also Shen Hong’s heart, so she has to swallow the words back into her stomach.

She leaned under the tree, and watched Shen Hong being busy.

As she looked around, He Yan suddenly heard movement behind her. When she looked at it again, it was the hanging eyes and the other two people who untied the horse ropes on the tree. He Yan was stunned and asked, “Are you going to leave now? Why not rest a little longer?”

After all, they stayed here for less than half an hour. It’s still early, and there is more than enough time to descend.

Droopy eyes didn’t seem to like He Yan very much, and was impatient to talk to her, “We don’t want to go down the mountain, we’ll be going ahead first for a walk.”

He Yan glanced at the front; they were at the top of the mountain now. To go ahead, they would turn over the top of the mountain. She frowned. “The instructor said that we couldn’t cross the mountain.”

“It’s just two more steps, not going to climb over,” Droopy eyes said, “I didn’t ask you to follow, you just stay here, we will come back later.”

“I think,” He Yan stood up, “It is better to listen to the instructor, maybe there is any danger.”

“Zheng Xuan, are you going to leave?” The other person had already untied the horse’s rope, turned over, got on the horse, and urged.

Hanging eyes—, that is, Zheng Xuan looked at He Yan and said, “You’re afraid of danger, so don’t go. Besides, only God knows, you know and I know, as long as you don’t say it, who will know? Don’t worry, stay with that fool, mow the grass, and have fun! We’ll go first.” After he said that, he ignored He Yan, turned on his horse, and walked deep into the jungle with the other two.

He Yan wanted to chase after him, but couldn’t put Shen Hong alone here. But while she was thinking, the three of them had already gone far. She sighed and sat down again under the tree. Just they didn’t find anything wrong all the way up the mountain. There were no people in the mountain, no big beasts, at most a few raccoon badger wild cats, and they drew far away when they saw people.

With the time of a cup of tea, Shen Hong came from the stream, and held a bundle of grass in each hand. The grass was really shaped like a scallion, long and soft, and there was a fragrance when you get close. Shen Hong found the longest one and tied the two large stacks of Shudai Cao, and handed them to He Yan. “Just this, go back and dry it under the sun, find a cloth bag, put it under the pillow to ensure a good sleep.”

He Yan said, “Thank you very much.”

“It’s okay.” Shen Hong waved his hand, only to realize that several other people had disappeared. He wondered, “Where are they?”

“Went for a walk.” He Yan shrugged, “Just wait for them to come back here.”

Shen Hong was puzzled and was about to ask questions. Suddenly, he heard a scream from the depths of the jungle. It was one of the recruits who had just been with them.

He Yan was startled, her eyebrows frowned, the next moment, she untied the rope and mounted her horse, and went straight in the direction of the sound.

# Chapter 68: **Suffering at your own expense**

The source of the sound was not far away. He Yan galloped her horse hurriedly, with Shen Hong, who said, “Hey, wait for me!” and then followed behind her as he ran.

As they went forward to the top of the mountain, over the hill, due to the shade, the forest got denser and increasingly moist. The sunlight could hardly peek though in front of people, and it just felt like a dark night – cold and gloomy. He Yan stopped in front of the bushes.

She saw the three people including Zheng Xuan in front of her, and the horses shifted on the spot anxiously and did not dare to step forward. Zheng Xuan’s face was pale, and the other two were almost crying.

Around the three of them, there were four wolves crouched down, and howled in a low tone at them. When He Yan and two of them came over, these wolves looked fiercely towards He Yan.

How can there be wolves in this season and at this time? He Yan was a little surprised.

As she looked at Zheng Xuan’s and the others, they were all in a mess. He Yan also noticed that the knife on Zheng Xuan’s waist was missing. The pack of wolves usually attacked a  single person, but would not attack the three of them for no reason. He Yan asked, “What did you do?”

Zheng Xuan did not speak with a pale face. The recruit behind him opened his mouth as he cried, “We, we walked to the front and saw a cave from which we heard a cry. So we went in and saw that there is a litter of wolf pups…”

“You moved the wolf pup?” He Yan asked sharply.

She said this so sternly, that the recruits were taken aback, and quickly replied, “No, no, we just want to take it back and raise it. It didn’t take long before we saw these wolves.”

He Yan wanted to pry the brains of these people away to see what was inside. When a person saw a wolf den, it meant that the female wolf was nearby. Instead of leaving quickly, they wanted to take away the cub of the wolf. Did they really think that the wolf would not follow the smell?

“Where is the wolf cub?” He Yan asked.

“…We were terrified and hurriedly threw the wolf pups back to them, but…”

“Just what?” He Yan suddenly had a bad feeling in her heart.

“It’s just that one fell on the tip of the stone and looked to be dead.” The man said.

 “You!” He Yan was extremely angry. This pack of wolves will not leave.

“What are you yelling at?!?” Zheng Xuan was angry, “Isn’t it just a few wolves? Just kill them! People will be forced to death by a few beasts?”

He Yan sneered, “Really? What about your knife?”

Zheng Xuan’s face was even more ugly. After he threw the wolf cub to death, he also drew his sword and confronted the wolves, but the wolves were cunning. He had good sword skills, but when he was nervous, he was taken advantage of by the wolf and was almost injured. Even the knife was lost. If this were not the case, he wouldn’t be facing such a desperate situation now.

“Stop talking nonsense, now either die together or find a way.” He forced a few words between his teeth.

As he talked, Shen Hong arrived with his horse. He was shocked when he saw this scene, and his voice immediately trembled, “So, so many wolves! How are there so many wolves?”

The wolves had already crouched, and showed their fangs. This was a sign of attack.

It’s okay if there was a fire torch, wolves are afraid of fire, but as they came out in daylight, they didn’t bring them. Just when she thought of this, the four wolves rushed towards three people who were together.

The three screamed in panic, and one of the horse’s legs was bitten and he almost fell. Shen Hong was almost crying as he yelled, “Help!”

What’s the use of calling for help now?  As there was no one else here, He Yan rushed in with a heartbeat. With this rush, she broke up the encirclement of the wolf. When several wolves saw her, they rushed towards her.

He Yan urged, “Where is your spear? Take it out and use it!”

“Oh, oh.” The two recruits woke up from their daze, and then they remembered their long spears, and they drew them out and waved them randomly, but they couldn’t hold them securely. He Yan’s heart suddenly felt cold.

It’s impossible to count on these people. He Yan wanted to touch the knife, only to remember that her knife was just borrowed by Shen Hong. She only had a long bamboo stick on her body. She shouted, “Shen Hong, throw my knife here!”

Shen Hong responded by drawing the knife with a tremble and threw it over, but he was too nervous, so he didn’t even throw it properly. The long knife fell in the air, which left only a short knife inserted in the sheath, which was thrown in midair and collected by He Yan.

The wolves moved around them again as they waited for the opportunity, He Yan said, “When I let you run, you will run back, leave everything alone, run down the mountain, run to the camp, let the teachers come up here, got it ?”

Shen Hong asked, “What about you?”

“I have a way to get rid of them!”

“He Yan, how can we run?” The recruits beside Zheng Xuan sobbed, “We are surrounded. They will bite the horse’s leg. If the horse’s leg is broken, we can’t get away…”

“It’s not that there is no way.” After He Yan said this, the short knife in her hand flew out suddenly. As the knife was small, she moved swiftly, and in the blink of an eye everyone saw the silver light flashing, and there was a horrible howl and the blood flowed out suddenly.

The biggest wolf fell to the ground and started to bleed out from his throat. The knife was completely submerged, only the hilt of the knife was left outside. After struggling a few times, the wolf stopped breathing.

“Run!” He Yan shouted.

Zheng Xuan and Shen Hong didn’t dare to show their courage. They immediately shouted “Hail” and rushed out of the dense forest with all their strength. They thought that the remaining wolves would chase them, so they didn’t dare to look back, and lost the figures in the blink of an eye.

The few remaining wolves didn’t chase them, they panicked for a moment and then looked at He Yan with vicious eyes.

He Yan killed the head wolf.

Wolves are social animals. Among these wolves, the biggest one was their leader. They listened to the wolf’s command, and He Yan killed it. They had no head, so they were not as smart as they were as a group. But in the same way, as the price of killing the head wolf, she will have to face revenge from these wolves.

A wolf leaped towards her with its white teeth exposed, its sharp claws and teeth could tear a person’s head apart. He Yan swept the stick fiercely in front of him and swept the wolf forward and pushed it into the air.

“Creak”, it was a very slight sound but He Yan’s ears attuned so her heart sank when she heard it.

The bamboo stick had cracks and may not be able to support the attack several times.

“Bad luck!” She cursed in a low voice, she could have dealt with three wolves alone, but now she has no weapons except this stick that was about to break. She really was a hero without a penny. No, it’s a blessing in disguise. It never rained, but it poured.[1]

People can’t be forced to death by animals – she chuckled as she thought of Zheng Xuan’s words just now.

On the battlefield, besides taking the initiative to attack, she actually had one thing she was good at, and that was to escape.

“Flee!”

The girl’s voice resounded through the mountains and forests, and countless birds took off. The long stick seemed to have infinite strength as it slashed straight ahead which forcibly opened an open path.

She drove her hose away with a long stick in her hand and seemed to disappear into the distant mountains and forests.

With the wolves that chased her, she felt like a fish that was swimming in boiling water[2]. There was no time to lose.

[1] Disasters pile up on one another; Misery loves company.

[2] Used as a predicate, object, or attributive; refers to who is about to perish.

# Chapter 69: **The Trap**

They did not know how long the horses ran whilst the wind was scraping through their ears until they came to a stop.

Shen Hong hugged the horse’s belly as they rode the wide, open, bumpy mountain road. They did not dare stop. Until this moment, they felt like they almost wanted to vomit.

They had already reached halfway down the mountain. Looking back, there were no shadows of beasts catching up from behind them.

“I’m saved, I’m saved.” A recruit exclaimed.

Shen Hong looked at his waist blankly. When he came, he brought a bamboo stick but had given the stick to He Yan. At the mere thought of He Yan back at the mountain, his face turned white, “What about He Yan?”

There was only one bamboo stick. Shen Hong lost the only mandarin duck knife and the other was inserted in the wolf’s throat. He Yan had no weapons. If the three wolves attacked with no hesitation, how could he hide?

“Shall we go back and have a look?” He summoned his courage.

“What nonsense are you talking about,” Zheng Xuan looked at him coldly, “Those wolves were there. We’ve finally got out. Why should we go back and die?”

“But He Yan is left behind out there. He’s alone and he can’t do anything.” Shen Hong thought of He Yan, his face flustered. He thought of He Yan as a good person, and they were just eating pine nuts together.

“Didn’t he let us go down the mountain to find an instructor?” The recruit beside Zheng Xuan said, “Let’s tell the instructor and hopefully save He Yan.”

“No way.”

Shen Hong looked at Zheng Xuan incredulously. Zheng Xuan’s expression remained unchanged, “If you tell the instructors, they’ll know what we’ve crossed the mountain.”

“He just saved us. If it weren’t for He Yan, we would’ve died a long time ago!” Shen Hong said loudly.

“You also know that the three of us almost died. He dealt with the wolves alone, so he’ll definitely die!” Zheng Xuan roared back, “Do you want to send others to die for a dead He Yan? Shen Hong, do you want this?”

Shen Hong was stunned. He was timid by nature and if it weren’t for what happened to his family, he would’ve been the young owner of a pharmacy. He would’ve lived a plain life without illness or disaster befalling him. He was already flustered with the situation and now when he heard he might die, he shuddered.

There was still his mother left in his family. If he died, there was no male relative left in his family. How was his mother supposed to survive then?

“I…I…” Shen Hong stammered and could not speak.

“Let’s wait for the sun to set and tell an instructor that He Yan didn’t listen to people’s dissuasion; that he climbed over the mountain and we couldn’t find him.” Zheng Xuan said emotionlessly.

This was not only preventing He Yan’s last chance for survival but also convicting He Yan of violating military orders. Shen Hong shook his head but the other two were already worried about being punished and biting the bullet.

Zheng Xuan stared at Shen Hong and continued, “If you want to file a complaint, go ahead. It’ll depend on whether the instructors believe you or us.”

After all, he no longer cared about what Shen Hong felt and galloped forward. Shen Hong had no choice but to keep up as it was getting late.

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It was getting late and there was almost no light left in the jungle.

The horse lost its way on Bai Yue Mountain. He Yan held the bamboo stick and looked back. She sighed in relief and finally got rid of the wolves.

It was the first time she saw such wild wolves chasing after her. He Yan curled her lips and thought of the wolves she encountered in Mo Xian back then. There was a famine in Mo Xian at that time and all the wolves within a radius of a hundred miles were caught and eaten. Those wolves were just as arrogant as those in Bai Yue Mountain. Thinking of this, she felt that Zheng Xuan’s hanging eyes were really useless. How could he want to domestic a wolf cub? A wolf was simply an untamable animal. A domestic dog will wag its tail whilst wolves will only bite peoples’ throats.

The horse turned around in a circle and stopped going forward.

There were woods everywhere and they looked exactly the same. She had just avoided the wolves from chasing her and failed to make markings on trees. She was afraid that she had already climbed over the mountain and she didn’t know where she was. If Shen Hong and the others had not told Liang Ping in time, she would not be able to go back after dusk. Without fire, she would have to spend the night on the mountain with the constant fear of encountering other beasts.

She pondered, sighed, turned over and dismounted. She planned to look for any wind-proof caves around her. She got down from the horse and stood up straight. Suddenly, she had an inkling that something was wrong.

She could not pinpoint the exact reason, but she trusted her intuition of danger after years of fighting on the battlefield. She tilted her head subconsciously and felt a black shadow passing over her head. Something scratched her neck, letting out a trace of blood.

The horse became frightened and raised its front hooves. He Yan did not tighten the reins and the horse rushed forward without turning his head back, disappearing into the jungle in the blink of an eye. When she turned her head back around, she saw the black shadow lying in the grass, revealing two blue eyes.

He Yan looked at the wolf. It pounced. Among the few wolves in the group, there was actually a clever one. Knowing that he could not catch up with He Yan, he took a shortcut. Bai Yue Mountain was not He Yan’s terrain, but it was the territory of the mountain beasts who lived here. She thought that it had been lurking around for a long time, and waited for He Yan’s vigilance to relax before rushing over to bite her throat.

In fact, this wolf almost succeeded.

He Yan touched her neck, a hot sensation came and blood stained her hand. Seeing that the blow had failed, the wolf bared its fangs and rushed from behind He Yan.

He Yan rolled around on the ground nervously, avoiding its claws. Now that her horse was gone, she could only attack the wolf with nothing but a bamboo stick.

When Shen Hong went up the mountain, she took a bunch of darts with her. The bamboo stick moved forward and leapt towards the wolf’s head.

The bamboo stick slashed the wolf’s head and it broke from the middle. The wolf’s head tilted and only a little blood dripped out. It looked at He Yan, howled twice furiously and rushed over again.

 “Stupid broken stick!” He Yan cursed and dodged, but the wolf was strategic and did not attack her head-on. Instead, it pounced from behind with the intention to bite her neck. He Yan dodged several times but failed on the last one. Her mistake cost a bite on her neck. She retaliated by punching the wolf’s abdomen with her elbows. The wolf wailed as he was beaten and threw her under him desperately.

A person and a wolf scrambled tougher and the fallen leaves in the forest rustled as a result. He Yan squeezed the wolf’s head hard to prevent its mouth from biting her. Should she use her mouth to bite the wolf? With just this thought, she suddenly felt that her feet were empty. Before she had time to react, she felt her body fall when she heard a ‘normal’ sound.

In the next moment, she fell through the ground with the wolf.

The sky became a circle and the branches seemed taller. Under her feet with puddles of mud. The wolf had just stood up.

She and the wolf had fallen into the trap together.

# Chapter 70: **Killing the Wolf**

The field was like a smaller martial arts stage. The difference was that her opponent was a bloodthirsty hound. At this moment, He Yan did not have any weapons in her hand. Even the broken bamboo stick was gone.

The wolf’s eyes were shining with excitement. It was a clever and cruel animal. In this case, the human will undoubtedly die.

A wry smile floated on He Yan’s lips. God has really treated her kindly. How could he arrange such a particularly difficult hurdle for her? She was not a fantastical warrior. How could she save herself every time?

This was probably a trap laid by hunters to catch rabbits or foxes. It may have been left for too long as it was covered with litter and leaves. Who knew that she and the wolf would fall when they fought here. Now, there was no way back.

The wolf slowly stood up. He Yan wanted to stand up too but she knew it would be bad if she moved. When she fell, her leg sprained. The moment her left leg moved, pain shot up her body.

She had to stand up by holding onto the stone wall.

The wolf bent down and let out a low growl. He Yan looked down at it, her back leaning against the stone wall and she remained motionless. It went around a few steps before hurling itself at He Yan.

The bloody mouth was opened wide in front of her eyes, its breath had a disgusting fishy smell. In the past, He Yan had glanced at the dead bones chewed by wolves on the side of roads. These mutilated bodies were beyond recognition, leaving only pools of rotten flesh.

At this critical time, she stretched out her left arm abruptly and the wolf ran towards her neck but was swept away by her palm. The action took some effort. After all, she could not fight the beast. It was just a flimsy attempt to protect her neck. Her arm was bitten instead.

She didn’t need to look to know that the bite was not light, but she did not care at all. Instead, she moved forward, as if to push her arm deeper into the wolf’s mouth. Before the wolf’s mouth became loose, He Yan’s right hand slammed forward.

A scream erupted from the wolf’s mouth, and the cunning and persistent wolf writhed desperately in the trap pit. Its eyes were scratched with sharp stones. Blood splashed everywhere.

He Yan let go of her hand. There was a small stone lying in her palm, one end was pointed with bloodstains.

She had blinded the wolf’s eyes.

From the moment she fell into the trap, she looked around everywhere to find something to defend herself. Unfortunately, in this trap pit, there were only scattered stones. She simply found the one that could be used.

The wolf lost a pair of eyes and could not see anything. The wolf struggled in the pit crazily due to the severe pain. He Yan gritted her teeth, leaned on the stone wall and pressed the wolf’s head with all of her strength. She held the stone again and slashed the wolf’s throat.

Blood slowly dripped out. It was warm at first, but it gradually became colder and colder.

She slowly sat down with little strength left in her body. Her left arm was bitten by the wolf and blood was stuck to her sleeve. Her left leg could not be lifted and her neck had a deep scratch. She was definitely in a mass. Looking at the dead wolf, her heart was filled with sadness.

She was so similar to this wolf as she was at the mercy of others when she was blinded. Now that she saw the wolf tragically die through her own hands, she felt exhausted and could no longer do anything when she thought about the past.

Sun went down and the last bit of light was also gone. The mountains became pitch black. She sat quietly, hanging her head silently. For a moment, she seemed to have no breath as if life in her was quietly sucked out.

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No one in Liang Zhou Wei knew of the thrilling scene at the mountains.

When Zheng Xuan arrived at the guardhouse, he went to the coach with the other two. They deliberately stayed at the foot of the mountain for a while before coming back. The sun has set, leaving only the remains of a little bloody sunset on the horizon, spreading brilliantly by the water.

Shen Hong did not go with them but instead, returned to his room.

When he went back, the rest of the recruits had already had dinner and came back to their dorms. As Shen Hong sat there idly, someone smiled and asked, “How, how does it feel to go up the mountains today?”

“Why does he look so dumb? Is he too tired and giddy?”

“It’s possible,” Someone else laughed, “He’s too weak.”

Everyone ridiculed. Thinking that Shen Hong was tired and did not take it too seriously, they left on their own record. After a while, Wang Ba came in with recruits greeting him.

He and Shen Hong stayed in the same room. Although Wang Ba lost to He Yan in archery, everyone still respects him here.

Wang Ba also saw Shen Hong sitting astonishingly on the bed and asked casually, “What happened to him?”

“I don’t know, It was his turn to go up the mountain today and that’s how he was when he came back down the mountain.” Someone replied.

Wang Ba glanced at Shen Hong and thought he was a little strange. Although he bullied this honest person on weekdays, Shen Hong did not feel lost no matter how much he was bullied. He walked up to Shen Hong and shook him, “What’s wrong? Are you scared out of your wits after encountering a wild beast in the mountains?”

He was silent before but when he heard the phrase ‘wild breast’, Shen Hong’s body trembled violently, his voice whimpered, not knowing what he was talking about. Wang Ba leaned closer and heard him saying an ‘I’m sorry’.

“I’m sorry? What are you sorry for?” Wang Ba frowned and asked.

Shen Hong was still talking to himself. Wang Ba got impatient and raised him like a chicken, “Smelly boy, tell me everything you encountered on the mountains today. If you don’t,” He shook his fist threateningly, “I’ll make you look so good!”

Shen Hong awoke from his thoughts when he mentioned this. Wang Ba looked at him fiercely. He was already so weak and guilty after a small provocation.

“He Yan…He Yan is still in the mountains!” He blurted out.

*He Yan?* As soon as Wang Ba heard He Yan’s name, his heart jumped. This person was really unjust to him but he still asked curiously, “What mountain? The mountain you climbed today? Why is he still on the mountain after you came down? What do you mean?”

“There were wolves…a lot of wolves! In order to save us, He Yan led the wolves away.” Shen Hong cried out.

Disregarding his breath, he continued, “Zheng Xuan won’t let us tell the instructors. He’ll just blame it on He Yan walking too far away from the group. No, no, it was obvious that they climbed over the top of the mountain and He Yan rescued them, but they wanted him to die and slander He Yan! He Yan was on the mountain alone without any weapons. We…we killed him!”

He was talking incoherently and in gibberish, but Wang Ba understood Shen Hong’s words with no problem. He was stunned for a moment but suddenly burst into anger. In his fury, he punched the table, scaring Shen Hong.

Shen Hong cried, “I didn’t want to. I couldn’t help it.”

Wang Ba glanced at him contemptuously, “Coward!”

With that, he turned around and left.

# Chapter 71: **Golden Wind and Jade Dew**

When Wang Ba found Instructor Liang, the Instructor was talking to Shen Han. Zheng Xuan and the others were standing beside him. Shen Han’s expression was extremely ugly and he could vaguely hear a few words, “Didn’t keep the military order…over the mountain…”

Zheng Xuan was still talking when someone rushed over. Before he could respond, he was met with a heavy punch to his face, knocking him to the ground.

“Wang Ba, are you crazy?” Liang Ping was shocked for a moment before returning to his senses and stopped Wang Ba’s next move.

“Teacher Liang, did this kid tell you that He Yan didn’t listen to military orders and walked over the mountain by himself? And that he hasn’t come back yet?” Wang Ba gasped.

Shen Han and Liang Ping looked at each other. Wang Ba sneered and stared at Zheng Xuan who was still on the ground.

“This shameless bastard! Zheng Xuan, how dare you accuse the one who saved you? You crossed the mountain peak by yourself and was surrounded by fucking wolves! Would you be able to run if it wasn’t for He Yan? Well, not only did you run away by yourself, but you also poured a basin of dirty water all over him! Are you still a man?”

Zheng Xuan’s face turned pale, his lips bleeding from the punch.

He stopped up, wiped the blood from his lips, “Instructor, don’t listen to his nonsense. He Yan climbed over the mountain by himself. If you don’t believe me, you…you should ask them.”

He pointed to the other two recruits who had gone up the mountain with him.

The other recruits nodded in a hurry, “Yes, it was…He Yan who wanted to cross the mountain himself. We tried to persuade him but he didn’t listen…”

Wang Ba was so angry he wanted to beat them up again, “Do you have any conscience?”

The cowardly and pitiful Shen Hong was a little scared. Although he had explained everything to Wang Ba, he still dared to lie. Besides He yan, Wang Ba didn’t like him that much. Even so, Wang Ba knew that He Yan would not take the initiative to seek death. He Yan looked so much more pleasing to the eye compared to Zheng Xuan.

Instructor Liang stopped Wang Ba and reprimanded him, “Stop what you’re doing and take a look at yourself! If the General came, every one of you would be punished!”

“What’s the matter?” Xiao Jue’s voice appeared from behind.

He walked over from the backyard of the guardhouse, glanced at the crowd and walked towards them, “Speak.”

Shen Han’s skull felt numb but he replied honestly, “Today, they went up the mountains together, but He Yan has not returned. Zhen Xuan claimed that He Yan didn’t listen to military orders and had climbed over the mountain. They couldn’t find him, so they rushed down the mountains by themselves before sunset.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Wang Ba jeered, “It was these few bastards who climbed over the hills and attracted wild wolves. To save them, He Yan led away the wolves. These people ran away by themselves without a care about the death of their brother. They even dunked him in a bucket of shit. Such people are insincere!”

“General, don’t listen to him,” Zheng Xuan hurriedly knelt to the ground, “We all persuaded He Yan, but he refused to listen and insisted on diverging from the group. It was getting late. We have to come back for help first.”

When he spoke, he sounded exceptionally genuine, but the glance Xiao Jue gave him was indecipherable to the surrounding people.

The sun had completely set now, the last trace of hazy red swallowed up by the mountains. The forest was silent. At this rate, He Yan’s chances of survival were only getting bleaker and bleaker.

“Since the instructors are unwilling to take the risk for him, then I will save him myself!” Wang Ba gritted his teeth, “I had to go outside every day in the past. So much so that I have been the king of the mountains for so many years. I’m not afraid of a few animals, but it seems like these days, humans are still inferior to beasts!”

Just as he took a step, a sword brushed past his scalp and plunged straight into the wooden stake in front of him. Wang Ba felt an instantaneous adrenaline rush.

He turned around and saw their General Xiao Jue looking unhappy.

“Liang Ping, control your soldiers.” He warned.

Liang Ping stiffened his head and responded with a yes, but was crying loudly in his heart for the millionth time. He thought he could fight a good cause in front of General Xiao this time, but he never thought he would be criticised. He felt discouraged and wished he had never appeared here.

Shen Han hesitated for a moment, “General, let’s bring a group of people into the mountains.”

“No need.” Xiao Jue interrupted him.

Wang Ba stared at him incredulously whilst Zheng Xuan’s eyes flashed with glee.

“The terrain is completed, so I’m afraid there might be traps. I’ll go instead.”

Once Xiao Jue finished speaking, he whistled and a black horse galloped from afar as if the beast was running on clouds. The horse was born extremely powerful with four snow-white hoofs. Its ears were green and the hair colour unique.

It affectionately rubbed its head against Xiao Jue’s hand. This was Xiao Jue’s favourite horse, Lu Er (Green Ears).

Xiao Jue mounted his horse before Shen Han could say anything.

Liang Ping asked in a daze, “Chief Instructor, the General said that there might be ‘traps’. Is there anyone else in the mountains?”

Shen Han didn’t speak, but he knew for certain that He Yan ran into some trouble. However, this time, they didn’t know if He Yan intentionally disappeared into the mountain.

They hoped that they were only overthinking.

…..

At night, the mountains got colder and colder.

The pit was so deep that it was difficult for her to climb up alone. She was injured and could not move. The bloody smell in the air will only attract nearby beasts. If she really started walking whilst dragging her injured body, she’d be swallowed up by beasts after walking a couple of steps.

It was pretty good here anyway.

He Yan looked up at the sky. The night sky was encircled by the trap, leaving only a rounded view. Looking up from here, she could see the shining river of stars. The night was as cool as the river water with countless bright stars shining away.

She moved her body so she could see the starry sky more clearly. She felt a little cold, but there was only a wolf corpse beside her in this pit. He Yan thought for a while and shrunk her body under the wolf’s belly. Although it was cold, there was a coat of fur that could temporarily provide insulation.

He Yan stretched out her hand to untie the flask on her waist. There was only one sip of water lift. She drank the remaining liquid and threw the flask aside. She was cold, hungry, thirsty for the first time in many, many years.

Suddenly, she remembered what Hong Shan said to her before going out in the morning, ‘Come back early and let’s spend the festival together.’

It was a fine autumn night. The fireflies flying across the bright moonlight, numerous stars flourishing and the white river flowed beneath the black Wu Que (magpie) Bridge [1].

He Yan raised her head and looked at the stars in the distance, muttering “Every family begs to watch the autumn moon, wearing tens and thousands of red silk [2].”

She sighed, a helpless smile dancing across her lips, “Today’s the Qi Xi Festival.”

The night was silently speechless. The cowherd and his weaver girl were crossing Wu Due Bridge in the far, far distance. The cool breeze rose slightly, blowing away all of the love and hatred in the world.

“What about it? Do you still want to set a flower boat on a river with your sweetheart?” A voice mocked.

He Yan looked up in surprise to see a slender figure appear in front of the vast sky. He stood by the trap. The moon was swaying; the stream bright as he looked at her playfully.

It was none other than Xiao Jue.

[1] These are the lines of a poem. It comes from the nine ancient poems of Altair and is related to the Qixi festival [weaver girl and cowherd]

[2] On the night of Tanabata/ July 7th/ Qi Xi, when looking at the blue sky, it is like seeing the Cowherd and the Weaver girl meeting on the Magpie Bridge across the “River of Heaven”. Families are watching the autumn moon while begging for a coincidence (threading needles on the moon), and tens of thousands of red threads are passed through.

# Chapter 72: **Riding Together**

In the pit, the youth was leaning against the stone wall. Half of his body was shrunk under the corpse of a bloody wild wolf. Although he looked scared and a little embarrassed, he was still in a jolly mood.

He looked at his pair of crystal clear and astonishing eyes without a trace of emotion.

He Yan blurted out, “General…Xiao, why are you here?”

At this time, she thought no one would come. If fact, after thinking about it carefully, the possibility of Zheng Xuan finding someone to rescue her was extremely slim. Shen Hong was so timid that he probably did not dare say anything if threatened a little. The others could not be counted on. She could only rely on herself.

He Yan wanted to stay here until dawn. She wanted to wait for the blood on her body to dry up and her strength to return before trying to climb up the pit. She did not expect anyone to rescue her, let alone Xiao Jue.

Xiao Jue disregarded her question and only asked, “Can you come up by yourself?”

“No.”

The pit was made roughly but it was too deep. Her legs were weak and she could not move.

Xiao Jue glanced at her, turned around and left. He Yan was confused.

What does that mean? Why did he leave just like that?

A moment later, he came back with a long object in his hand. He Yan glanced at it intently. Isn’t this the bamboo stick that was broken by her? Although it was broken into two pieces, it was long enough for He Yan to grab hold of it.

Xiao Jue knelt down beside the pit and lowered the bamboo stick, “Grab hold of it.”

He Yan was speechless but had to resign her fate to hold it. Did she expect Xiao Jue to jump down and carry herself out? She shuddered in chills with that single train of thought.

This person looked as beautiful as jade. With great strength, He Yan grabbed hold of the bamboo stick. Xiao Jue pulled her out single-handedly. He stretched out his hand towards He Yan when she was close to the top, signalling He Yan to grab onto him.

He Yan stretched her arm halfway, but her hand froze in the air. Her arm was stained with blood from her fight with the wolf. She did not know whether the blood belonged to her or the wolf. Her hands were sticky.

The combination of her blood-stained hand and Xiao Jue’s jade white hand was really ugly.

Xiao Jue favoured cleanliness the most, so He Yan felt hesitant. The man seemed impatient, but before she could think, he leaned forward and gripped her wrist, pulling her up.

The suffocating smell of blood no longer lingered now that she was out of the pit. The sky had become much larger as well. The stars were spread all over across her eyes, with the ones on her peripheral vision sinking to the ground. Countless bright ones merged together, illuminating the world.

She looked at Xiao Jue again.

The young man stood up, dropped the bamboo stick and stared at her.

“Did you kill the wolf?”

He Yan did not understand what the problem was.

The smile still graced her lips, “Yes, I almost died. It was stoned to death because I didn’t have a weapon, and I was bitten twice from the fight.”

Bloodstains leaked from the teenager’s sleeves, dyeing the original red clothing darker. She looked as normal and asked nonchalantly, “Why did the General come in person? What about the others?”

“It’s too late. I came up alone.”

He clicked his tongue and only then did He Yan see that there was a horse not far away. The horse was not tied with a rope. The horse heard Xiao Jue’s signal, so it obediently ran next to Xiao Jue’s side itself.

He Yan saw its ears turn green from the moonlight’s illumination. Her heart moved. Everyone knows that General Feng Yun has a favourite horse. It could travel thousands of miles a day, chasing both wind and lighting. She did not expect to see Lu Er today.

“Then…Are we going back now?” He Yan asked hesitantly.

Xiao Jue looked at her in disbelief, “Do you want to spend the night here?”

“No, I don’t,” He yan explained, “I mean, there’s no one else here but a horse.”

Does Xiao Jue want her to trek the entire way back to camp? Would that not be too cruel and miserable for her?

He patted Lu Er’s head and the steed lowered his head docilely.

Xiao Jue commanded, “Get up here.”

Did she hear it right? Was Xiao Jue really letting her ride this peerless horse?

“Huh…me?” He Yan was shocked.

Xiao Jue’s mouth twitched, “You can walk back if you want.”

“No, no, I can’t!” He Yan replied, “I’m just very honoured!”

What a great day. She could actually ride the legendary Lu Er. He Yan just wanted to laugh out loud.

She limped towards Lu Er. This horse was extremely tall and powerful. The movement of the horse turning should have been very dashing, but now, she was hurt all over. She couldn’t be cool even if she wanted to. She could only grab the saddle with one hand and attempt to climb up.

He Yan’s leg was injured and her arm was bitten by the wolf. When she exerted force, the dried out blood immediately oozed out, soaking half of her sleeve. Even then, her expression remained steady. Her pale face still had a large grin and drops of sweat rolled on her forehead, damping her hair.

This person did not even know how messed up he looked. Xiao Jue raised his eyebrows slightly at this notion.

He Yan was still climbing up with her hands and feet together. The voice above her spoke, “Are you not hurt?”

He Yan was taken aback by the question. Before she knew, he hoisted her up from her waist. She was already sitting in front of Xiao Jue before she had time to exclaim. The moon lily fragrance wafted across her senses, disrupting her thoughts.

“Sit still.” Xiao Jue commanded.

He Yan could not explain how she felt at this moment.

She did not explain Xiao Jue would actually hug her from behind on horseback….Could this be considered a back hug? She could not comprehend the situation quick enough. It happened too fast.

However, right now, he was indeed sitting behind her. He Yan was petite, her head just reached his chest. This was as if….As if she was snuggling in his arms.

She was horrified by this idea herself. In her mind, she did not feel ashamed, but rather, frightened. Xiao Jue was not a romantic person and she had the identity of a man.

Today, all kinds of things happened. Was she dreaming?

“What’s wrong?” He asked.

“Look at the wolf,” He Yan pointed at the wolf corpse in the pit, “I had a hard time killing it, so it’ll be a pity to just leave it here.”

The man responded, annoyed, “What do you want?”

“Can I bring it along?” He Yan asked tentatively.

After a long pause, the young man sneered, “Sure.”

“Really?” He Yan looked back in surprise, “General, you’re such a nice person!” She really did not expect much.

The corners of his lips curved upwards, his gaze remained indifferent, “If it comes up, you go down.”

He Yan was speechless for a moment, “Forget I said that.”

The horse started to walk a couple of steps. She turned her head back and almost bumped into Xiao Jue’s arms, “Or, I could go down and peel the wolf skin before leaving. It’s going to be autumn soon and it’ll be cold in no time. How nice would it be to make wolf leather boots?”

The answer to her comment was two heartless words.

“Shut up.”

# Chapter 73: TAKING A LOOK AT YOUR SWORD

The horse trotted in the deep mountains. It was not very fast, because it was the night road, so it also could not see clearly. It was a pity, He Yan finally got to ride on the green ears, but wasn’t able to experience the meaning of the legendary  “crossing the mountains and river, like walking on the ground”.

It was really too much of a loss.

The starlight and moonlight leaked down from the branches and leaves of the forest, He Yan rode on the horse and finally had the heart to look at the surrounding scenery. When she looked, she saw a wolf lying not far away, as it was  dead.

She was surprised for a moment and then walked a few steps forward, and there was another wolf’s corpse.

After seeing about three such wolf corpses, He Yan sensed that this was not a coincidence. She swallowed her saliva and asked cautiously, “Xiao … General, did you do all this?”

“Since I met them on the way, I removed them for convenience, otherwise it’s troublesome if they followed all the way.” He replied.

He Yan sighed in her heart, look at this, worthy of being a teenage killer general, killing at the drop of a hat[1], no wonder she didn’t encounter any wild wolves along the way, originally the bold ones were all killed by Xiao Jue, right? She looked at the wolf corpses again, all of them had their throats sealed with a single sword slash, and the wounds were extremely small and precise.

Her gaze shifted down slightly and fell on the sword that was on Xiao Jue’s waist. Everyone knew that General Feng Yun had a famous horse and a precious sword. The horse was called Green Ears, and the sword was named Drinking Autumn[Yinqiu]. The blade of the sword shines blue and can cut iron like mud. Rumor has it that Drinking Autumn has a crystal clear body, like frost and snow. Now, as Drinking Autumn was worn on Xiao Jue’s waist not sheathed, she could not see what it looked like.

These wolves should have died under the sword Drinking Autumn, since ancient times,cherished swords were only given to heroes, He Yan felt that she can barely count as a hero. Seeing the sword, she couldn’t  help but want to touch it.

She then quietly reached out and touched the back.

Suddenly, feeling her body stiffen, He Yan immediately let go and shouted, “I did not mean to touch your waist, I just wanted to touch your sword!”

After a long while, the person’s voice came from behind who seemed to hold back his anger, “You don’t need to talk.”

“I’ll die of boredom if I don’t talk.” He Yan said, “General, actually you don’t have to be so serious.” She said, “Look, you’ve killed so many wolves but didn’t take them away, these wolves ended up being cheap for the foxes in the mountain. Not to mention eating meat, the wolf skins are the top-quality ones. The furs of the ones I killed are incomplete and can only be used for boots. But the ones you killed didn’t damage the fur and are enough to make a big cloak. But wolf’s fur cloak is not very suitable for you, I think your clothes material is more expensive, why not give me a bargain? I can roll in the snow with a wolf’s fur cloak in winter.”

Xiao Jue seemed to be dizzy from her nonsense, and actually took her words, though his tone wasn’t very nice as he hooked his lips and said sarcastically, “You like wolf skins so much, no wonder you didn’t even let go of the dead wolf in the trap.”

“That’s not true, I was just too cold.” He Yan shook her head, “The general loves cleanliness, does not like dirt, and cannot allow the blood of animals to stain his clothes. We’re different, not to mention dead wolves, I’ve even slept in a pile of dead people.”

After a moment of silence behind him, Xiao Jue asked, “When?”

“When I was a kid, I can’t even remember clearly.” He Yan looked at the stars in the sky, “At that time, in order to save my life, I could not help it. Letting the dead pile up, after all, I was the only one who survived amongst the pile of the dead.”

She thought that Xiao Jue would ask what happened, and was about to make up something, but she didn’t expect Xiao Jue to ask nothing and the rhetoric that she prepared fell flat.

He Yan’s thoughts went back in time.

It was not long after she arrived in Desert[Moxian] County when a group of recruits from the Fuyue Army encountered the Western Qiang at the edge of the desert.

They were all new soldiers and did not know how to fight, but only relied on their bloodlust. But this spirit was soon dispersed by the fierceness of the Western Qiang. In the end, the whole team of recruits was wiped out.

Though He Yan was also seriously injured, she was still alive. She hid under the corpses of the group and still had a little breath left. The Western Qiang people set all the corpses on fire and left. At that time, He Yan thought that she would probably die in the desert.

But who knew God wouldn’t let her die. The rain suddenly doused the fires on the corpses. He Yan neither had the strength to move, nor did she dare to move, let alone to even cry.

The young man who was playing with her yesterday became an immobile corpse, and the elder brother who scolded her in the morning had long since been disembodied. She lay amongst the broken limbs, and for the first time, she learned the cruelty of war. She was in the pile of the dead, smelling the blood and shedding tears with her eyes open all night.

At dawn, a pedestrian passed by and buried all the bodies in place, collecting them for them, and also found the dying He Yan, saving her life.

Later on, He Yan thought countless times that although she used to be a man in the capital, in the end, she was not strong enough, and in her heart, she probably had left herself a way out. But after that night, she often did things, no longer leaving a way back for herself, she was not a girl, no one would dry her tears on the battlefield, the only thing to do is to struggle for life in every battle.

At any time, survival would always be the first priority. In order to survive, what about being next to the wolf corpses? When necessary, if she really couldn’t get out, she could even eat the raw wolf meat.

But Xiao Jue probably couldn’t understand.

In her heart, He Yan let out a soft sigh. At this time, she really felt a little cold.

The young man was dressed in black clothes and armor, his cloak shielding the coolness, and He Yan was a little afraid of getting his clothes dirty, so she didn’t dare to lean back too much, but she couldn’t help but look up at him, and from this angle, she could just see his beautiful jawline.

Xiao Jue was really good looking, in her past life or be it in the present life, He Yan had to admit this fact. He was born both handsome and heroic, with a beautiful posture, although indifferent, but with a touch of charming carelessness.

He gave birth to the most beautiful pair of eyes, like autumn water clear thin and cold, as if nothing has ever been reflected in his eyes, people can’t help but think, if one day this pair of eyes were to seriously look at a person, what extent of gentleness could be shown.

She also remembered the hand Xiao Jue extended to her in the trap, and inexplicably thought of “fingers long and sharp as spring bamboo shoots and eyes as clear and blue as autumn waves”, and felt that it was too suitable for this person.

No wonder he had a beautiful name called “Jade Face General”, thinking about it, she felt unfair. They both are young generals, but why was he  called “Jade Face General”, while she could only be called as “Mask General”? He Yan thought to herself, if she had taken off my mask at that time, she might have been able to get the title “Pan An of the Army”[1] or something.

She thought to herself, but did not know that she was staring at Xiao Jue’s face with admiration and awe, and then sighing with frustration and loss as if she were a madman which was inexplicable in Xiao Jue’s eyes.

And rather stupid.

[1]Like the four beauties in ancient China, there are divergent opinions. There are several widely spread theories.

The most common sayings are Pan An, King Lanling, Song Yu, Wei Jie.

These beautiful men have a common feature: they are both talented and handsome, or they are extremely well-trained in literature and music, or they are powerful in culture and martial arts. It is said that these people have caused scenes where thousands of people are rushing to meet when they travel.

# Chapter 74: **Medicine**

After crossing the hill, the subsequent road was a bit easier.

Xiao Jue drove his horse to a trot. Unknowingly, He Yan fell asleep, not knowing how long it took. Someone patted her on the shoulders and called her name, “He Yan!”

She opened her eyes and saw Instructor Liang standing in front of her. She was still dozing against Xiao Jue and there was a faint trace of dampness on the inside of Xiao Jue’s sleeves, which might be because of her saliva.

He Yan wiped her mouth and said apologetically, “Is that ok…”

Before she could finish speaking, the person had already dismounted neatly, almost causing her to fall over. Xiao Jue said to Liang Ping, “I’ll leave it to you.” Without even looking at He Yan, he left by himself.

He Yan, “…”

Look at that, he didn’t even give her a chance to say thank you. He Yan shrugged, Liang Ping helped herself down from the horse. Green Ears was also quick-witted. After He Yan left, he lifted his hooves and went to find his master.

There was blood all over He Yan, even though Liang Ping was full of doubts, he couldn’t ask at this moment and only said, “Can you still move?”

“Instructor Liang looks down on me too much,” she smiled, “there is no problem.”

“Hey,” Liang Ping sighed, “Forget it, I will send you back first, bandage the wound first, and we’ll talk about it later.”

He Yan immediately agreed.

In the room, Mak, Shi, and the others were waiting. As soon as He Yan entered, a group of people gathered up and asked in a hurry.

“How are you? Are you okay? Is everything fine?”

“Why is there so much blood? Did someone die?”

He Yan even saw Wang Ba, sitting on the box in the corner. Seeing her, he seemed to want to step forward. Finally, he endured it and hummed, “So you’re not dead.”

“Thank you, brother,” He Yan already knew from Liang Ping that it was Wang Ba who went looking for Shen Han. She blinked at him and said gratifiedly, “The brother misses me so much, this boss feels very moved.”

“You!” Wang Ba jumped up from the box, glared at her like a cat with blown up fur, and walked away angrily, almost breaking the door before leaving.

He Yan was helped to sit on her bed as Shi handed He Yan a bowl of water. He Yan finished drinking in one gulp, finally feeling that her throat became more comfortable.

Mak said, “Brother Ahe, your hands have been  bleeding. Change your clothes quickly, okay?”

He Yan coughed lightly, “In fact, it’s not that serious.”

“Is this not serious?” Hong Shan frowned. “If it wasn’t for General Xiao who went up the mountain to find you, would you still be alive tomorrow morning?”

“You shouldn’t play hero,” Jiang Jiao also came. “It’s not worth it for that kind of person.”

“Not bad.” Huang Xiong pinched the Buddha beads on his neck. “You should have let them face the wolves by themselves.”

He Yan, “…” She looked at the room full of people, and for the first time she found out that her popularity was so high? So many people… it is really noisy.

In the midst of the chatter, someone pushed the door and came in again, sounding like an oriole, “You all go out, I’ll deliver the medicine.”

The room fell silent for a moment.

He Yan looked over curiously and saw that the crowd split out automatically, and a young woman walked in. The woman was wearing a pure white satin dress, her long hair tied in a bun with a white ribbon, and a lotus flower jade hairpin on her head. She was looking simple and beautiful. She had a soft jade face, moon-like brows, and starry eyes that were very slender and charming.

Even the mosquitoes in the Liangzhou Wei were all male. Where will they ever see such an elegant and refined beauty? For a while, these guys were silent, for fear of disturbing this charming fairy.

He Yan was confused and only asked, “You are…”

“I am Liangzhou Wei’s medical girl,” the girl whispered, “Shen Muxue.”

He Yan felt the name was familiar, but she couldn’t remember where she had heard it. Shen Muxue had already gently placed the medicine bowl in her hand on to the bed. After that, she turned around and said to the others, “Could you all please go out first.”

Hong Shan blushed immediately and said, “Okay, okay.” He yelled and drove the others out, and when he left, he gave He Yan an enviable look.

He Yan, “…”

He Yan asked, “Is this the medicine for me?”

Shen Muxue nodded, and He Yan picked up the bowl and drank it. Shen Muxue was stunned and said, “Actually, you don’t have to drink so urgently…”

“Huh?” He Yan scratched her head, “I’ll have to drink it anyway.”

Seemingly amused by her, Shen Muxue smiled, and said, “Then little brother take off your clothes first, I’ll apply the medicine for you.”

He Yan hesitated for a while with the ready-made hot water beside her, and said, “Well, Miss Shen, you can just put the medicine here, I’ll apply it myself.”

“You?” Shen Muxue shook her head, “I’ll do it.”

“You are young, and you are still a girl,” He Yan said earnestly and persuaded her, “I am a man after all, you can see how bad it is.”

“There is no man or woman in front of the doctor.” Shen Muxue replied.

He Yan thought for a while, “You don’t care, I do.”

Shen Muxue raised her head and He Yan looked back fearlessly while saying, “I have a fiancee, Miss Shen, my body can only be seen by my fiancee. If my pure and innocent body gets tainted by you. You’ll have to take responsibility. Understand?” She wrapped her clothes tightly as if she would rather die than yield.

Shen Muxue had never seen such a shameless person, and for a while, the movement of her hand stopped. She didn’t know how to react when she looked at her.

“You can leave the medicine here.” He Yan said, “I’ll apply the medicine myself, as I want to protect myself as jade for my sweetheart. You must not harm me.” She looked serious.

Shen Muxue was speechless for a moment and was finally defeated by He Yan’s shamelessness. She said, “The medicine and hot water are here. I’ll go out. You can call me when you’re done.”

He Yan gladly nodded, “Thank you, Miss, for your understanding.”

As Shen Muxue retired, He Yan sighed in relief. She hurriedly took off her blood-covered clothes, took the piece of cloth soaked in hot water, and wiped her lower body haphazardly, after that she changed into a set of clean clothes. She rolled up her sleeves, as her  elbow that was bitten by the wolf was bloody and horrible. He Yan took a deep breath, changed the piece of cloth, to wash the blood from the wound.

At this moment, the door was pushed open again, as He Yan was still busy wiping, she said without looking up, “Didn’t I say that you don’t need to come in, I will apply the medicine myself?”

A cold voice sounded, “Your chastity for your fiancee is really touching.”

He Yan raised her head and saw Xiao Jue standing a few steps away from her, holding his chest and looking at her calmly.

He Yan’s heart almost jumped out of her chest. Fortunately, she moved fast and had already changed her clothes, so she squeezed out a smile, “Why is the general here? You shouldn’t have come to settle the scores with me, right? I told you earlier, I didn’t mean to touch your waist on the mountain before.”

Xiao Jue’s expression stiffened, his eyes were almost on fire , but he just raised his hand, and a round object was thrown into He Yan’s arms.

He Yan picked it up and saw that it was an exquisite porcelain bottle, which looked like a mandarin pot. She pulled out the stopper and smelt it closely, it felt bitter and astringent.

“This is… medicine?” she asked hesitantly.

The man said in a bad mood, “Heal your own injuries first.”

This scene was inexplicably familiar. He Yan was startled and looked at him again. Xiao Jue had just changed his clothes, as clean as new, standing here, looking very beautiful, moonlight streaming down from outside, reflecting his long graceful figure, and for an instant, seemed to have returned to the old days.

Almost similar…

# Chapter 75: **Back in those days**

When He Yan was young, she was not as clever as she was now. If she were to look at her past self with the eyes of the present, she would feel that she was too stupid.

She was not very good at literature and martial arts, similar to the current Cheng Lisu, and was regarded as a loser , but unlike Cheng Lisu who had a powerful uncle, the He family’s background was not considered great in the Xiang Chang Hall. Therefore, she was not as well respected  as Cheng Lisu.

Furthermore she wore a mask all day long when she was a teenager, always appearing as the odd one out in the crowd, and there was a ghost in her heart, so she had  never dared to show her feet when she came and went with the teenagers[1]. After going back and forth, finally, the other teenagers from the Xiang Chang Hall began isolating her.

The rejection of the teenagers came straightforward. At first, it was just playing differently with her, not calling her when playing Cuju[2]. Then, it became even worse; the reason was not a big deal; it was merely because she worked too hard.

When He Yan was a child, she caught the idea of ​​”the stupid bird flies first”, so she really started from being the stupid bird. The worse in literature and martial arts one is, the more one must and should learn more seriously than anyone else. Even though the gentlemen of Xiang Chang hall felt that this child was really not suitable for studying and practicing martial arts, they were often moved by He Yan’s persistent spirit of studying. So they often praised He Yan in class.

“Diligent learner is like a seedling in springs. It doesn’t seem to grow much with the naked eye, but with each day it will grow stronger[3]. You all look at He Rufei and learn from him!”

They were all 14 or 15-year-old young men, who have always loved to fight for the best, so learning from others, moreover from He Yan? What should they learn from him? To study hard and practice hard every day, yet still be the last one? Isn’t it being out of their own mind?

However, the several gentlemen seem to like He Yan very much.

The youngsters’ anger grew from their hearts, and the root of their evil was a mixture of guilt, jealousy, and disdain., The more they saw the masked kid, the more the kid didn’t seem pleasing to their eyes, so every now and then they would  find some troubles for He Yan.

Like today, the dagger would deliberately cut He Yan’s clothes during the dagger comparison. The other days when she would have to train the horse, someone would feed her horse some sneezing grass or sometimes they would deliberately poke a hole in her boots, making her fall onto the ground, causing the stone to cut through the sole of the foot. And When He Yan would get up from the ground embarrassed, the teenagers who were hiding together would make fun of her.

As a teenager, He Yan was too dumb. She couldn’t do anything to sue the students, and the gentlemen didn’t know the little actions of the students in private. So He Yan had a very difficult time.

One day, when it was winter, where the weather was very cold. When the teenagers were practicing swords in the academy, they did not know who poured a basin of water on the ground. The water froze very quickly, so they urged He Yan to come outside, “He Rufei, Hurry up, hurry up, the teacher is calling you!”

He Yan ran out in a hurry, slipped on her feet, and fell flat on her stomach.

The fall was so heavy that she only felt her head spinning, and she didn’t get up for a long time. Those teenagers hid in the corner and laughed, only saying, “He really was fooled!”

He Yan sat there for a while before standing up, pursing her lips, and said nothing. The students of Xiang Chang Hall/ returned home once a month. From the clothes she brought this month, there was no longer a clean one left. After being fooled so many times, even the deities would also not have any clothes left. Under such weather, where the sun is not  seen for a long time, it was very difficult to dry them.

He Yan spent the whole day wearing semi-damp clothes. At night, she got up from the bed, did not go to practice sword, and ran straight into the hall of the academy.

Even the clay figurine also has three parts of earthiness[4], not to mention that she was the eldest master of the He family, more or less, but she did have the temperament. However, she was still judging the situation soberly. Those young men were tall and mighty; moreover, they were much better than her, so she couldn’t beat them. But was it possible to just let it go like this? Was it really impossible to do something?

How can she let out her anger?

14-year-old He Yan thought for a long time and finally figured out a way.

It started to snow at night. She wore clothes that hasn’t dried yet, braved the wind and snow, went to the backyard well to fetch a bucket of water, and ran to the hall with the bucket of water.

She remembered where everyone in the group of teenagers sat in the day. She found their copybooks under their desks. This month’s homework was to copy the “Xing Li Zi Xun [Character discipline of gender]” five times, and tomorrow was the time to hand in the homework at the end of the month.

He Yan poured all the water from the bucket on them.

The water soaked the writing instantly, and it became a big blur. He Yan let out a sigh of relief, and after that, a trace of tension rose again.

She hurriedly tucked the copybooks back to their original position and hurried out carrying the empty bucket. It was the first time she had done this kind of thing, so the anxiousness was unavoidable. She was afraid to turn on the light in the dark and walked to the door without looking at the threshold/doorstep under her feet, and with a bang, she fell.

She sucked in a cold breath with pain; it was the second time she fell that day, and this time it was even worse. Her elbow directly hit the wooden thorn on the threshold, cutting out a gash, as the blood flowed out. He Yan sat up strenuously, raised her wounded arm, and thought to herself could it be because of “that many acts of unrighteousness will kill her?”

She only did it once, okay, God treats her too harshly!

Anyway, she has to return the bucket quickly, the bucket, Ah… where’s her bucket? She just remembered that she had fallen so hard just now and that the bucket fell on the ground, so it should have made a loud noise, awakening everyone, why is it still so quiet now?

He Yan raised her head in a daze, stood up, and walked two steps forward, only to see a person standing outside the door at some unknown time. He was leaning lazily on the wooden door, with his back facing He Yan and an iron bucket in his hand.

It was Xiao Jue.

For a moment, He Yan was so nervous she didn’t dare to say anything.

Did he see it? He shouldn’t have seen it, right? Impossible, he must have seen it, he’s still holding the bucket in his hand. But if he didn’t see it, how should she explain it? Should she say she was watering the flowers here in the middle of the night?

He Yan thought wildly. The boy saw her standing blankly on the spot and raised his eyebrows and said, “Aren’ you hurt?”

 He Yan, “Huh?”

His gaze fell on He Yan’s elbow, and because she had just fetched water,  her sleeves were rolled up. Between the white and tender elbows, there was a bloodstain, like an ugly embroidery, which was particularly conspicuous under the faint lantern light.

He Yan subconsciously wanted to hide her hands behind her back.

The boy glanced at her impatiently and said coldly, “Follow me.”

He Yan didn’t know why she listened to him. She might probably have been too shocked and confused, which made her follow him obediently.

Xiao Jue first put the iron bucket back to the well, and turned back only to see her holding up her arm in a daze, so he sneered, with a meaningful expression, “Being a coward and yet learning to do bad things.”

He Yan clenched her fists and said nothing, she was very nervous. On normal days, Xiao Jue only walked with his few close friends and was not close with the other teenagers in the academy, so He Yan didn’t know what this person thinks. If he goes to denounce herself…

While she was immersed in her thoughts, a cold pot was thrown into her arms.

He Yan looked down and saw that it seemed to be a mandarin pot with a delicate body and intricate carvings.

She heard her own voice, as small as a gnat, “What is this?”

“Can’t you see it?” The boy turned his head, looking lazy, “Medicine.”

[1] having a ghost in heart means having a secret or bad intent, etc. Revealing feet indicates revealing the secret as we can see if someone is a ghost from their feet so she was afraid that her secret might slip out of her mouth accidentally.

[2] An ancient Chinese game involving kicking a ball through an opening into a net.

[3] It means that without hard work there will be no result and there is no such thing as a shortcut to obtaining something.

[4] Nature is difficult to change or the essence is difficult to change; just like the essence of soil can’t be erased from a clay figure.

# Chapter 76: **THE QIXI FESTIVAL/TANABATA**

He Yan held the mandarin pot in a daze.

As she was pulled back from her thoughts by a voice in front of her, “Can’t use it?”

She looked up, and the young man in the dark blue robe had already sat down on the stool in front of her bed and took the pot from her hand.

The mandarin pot had a secret, it could hold two kinds of wine and was an essential tool for poisoning people. He pulled a piece of white cloth and poured little by little. The first to flow out was the medicine, and then the powder. A small spoon was embedded next to the pot’s handle. Xiao Jue took out the spoon to smoothen out the mixture.

As he looked down while doing these , and his long eyelashes hanging down his profile was handsome and compelling, with his youthful beauty, making people dazed, she even forgot whether she was in Liangzhou Wei at the moment or in the Xiang Chang Hall that was thousands of miles away.

When He Yan was in a daze, he had already wiped the ointment on the white cloth and threw it to He Yan, with an extremely indifferent tone, “Smear it on yourself.”

“Oh,” He Yan had already expected it, and muttered softly, “I didn’t expect you to help me.”

When he heard it, he stared at He Yan with a smile but not a smile, “I dare not delay you in keeping your body like jade.”

“It’s good that you know.” He Yan smiled and said, “But thank you, General, for such an expensive medicine.”

“There is a shortage of medicine in the guardhouse unless you want to die.” He said.

He Yan looked at him solemnly, “That also saved my life. I didn’t expect the General to be such a compassionate person.”

Xiao Jue said, “If there’s nothing else…” and then he stood up and left.

He Yan saw that he had really left this time, she leaned against the head of the bed and sighed softly. Xiao Jue’s medicine was very effective, it was refreshing and cool, and the pain relieved a lot after applying it.

He Yan looked at the pot, his thoughts drifting away.

On that snowy night at the age of fourteen, Xiao Jue was not as indifferent as he was now. At least when He Yan said “I don’t know how to use it” at that time, he not only helped to open the mandarin pot but also personally applied medicine to her.

It was strange that the image of that time was already blurred, but today when Xiao Jue came, those forgotten details slowly unfolded before He Yan’s eyes, as if it had only just happened, and the clarity was incredible.

She was sitting on the stone bench in the yard, as the lazy and indifferent teenager patiently applied medicine to her, creating an unusual scene. His eyebrows were picturesque, and his face was right in front of He Yan, as she could almost feel his warm breath, which faded away from the sharpness of the past, with soft warmth, completely covering her cold and trembling heart.

The mask covered her face, and the other party could not see her expression, nor could he feel her throbbing at that time.

It was difficult for anyone to be unmoved by a person like him, especially when such an indifferent person was treating them tenderly. He Yan was young at the time and had no resistance at all.

He left after helping her with the medicine, and He Yan whispered to him, “Your medicine.”

“Give it to you.” The young man replied casually, “You are so stupid. the chance of you getting hurt might happen a lot in the future. Keep it for yourself.”

From his prediction, the chances of her being injured were really countless. The ointment in the mandarin pot had long been used up, and the pot was later lost by her in a war, which was quite a pity to think about it.

By the next day, the teenagers went to the academy and found that the copybooks on their desks were wet with water, they couldn’t even recognize the handwriting, and it was a mess.

“Who did it? Come out, otherwise, you wait and see if I’ll kill you or not!” they roared fiercely.

“Isn’t it simple? Just see whose copybook is clean, look for it inside, and you can always find the one who has a grudge against us.” Someone offered a clever trick.

He Yan’s heart tightened, and she was extremely annoyed. No wonder she was stupid, and she didn’t even think of such a thing. Her copybook was neat and tidy. After a little investigation, wouldn’t they find it was her work?

Forget it, it has happened, be a man, and be brave to face consequences. She was heartbroken, and could only admit to her fate, as she watched the teenagers still asking the students in the academy to take out the copybook for checking.

He was about to walk in front of her.

He Yan plucked up her courage and was about to stand up and shout, “I did it.” Suddenly, someone came in and put the book on the table.

The movement was so loud that everyone looked to the other side, and saw the handsome young man in a white robe leaning against the wall with his arms folded, his expression lazy, and he said casually, “I did it.”

There was an uproar.

“Brother Huai, Huai Jin Brother, was it really you who did it?” someone asked cautiously.

Xiao Huaijin was unlike He Rufei. No one in the capital dared to provoke him, furthermore, the Xiao family alone could crush the people to death, not only the gentleman had to protect him, but also someone whom the emperor personally praised.

“It’s me.” He answered confidently.

“But why?” the man asked with a sobbing face.

“No reason,” the boy glanced at him, and replied in an unsatisfactory way, “slippery hands.”

“Poof”, He Yan couldn’t hold back her laughter, noticing everyone’s gaze, she hurriedly turned around as if nothing had happened.

And after that?

After that, the matter was left unresolved, because it was Xiao Huaijin, so other people didn’t dare to say anything and could only admit that they were unlucky.

Coming back to the present, with a “creak”, the door was pushed open, and Shen Muxue walked in. She took the empty medicine bowl and water basin away and asked He Yan not to press the wound before she left.

From the narrow window of the room, one can see the sky from all four corners, with a bright moon hanging in the sky, and the stars shining brightly.

She whispered, “Today is Qixi\* Festival…”

[Editor’s note: for those who don’t know, the Qixi Festival is also known as the Chinese valentine’s day.]

She had never celebrated a festival. Before she used to dress up as a man, this kind of festival had nothing to do with her. Later, when she married Xu Zhiheng, she was looking forward to it at the very beginning. No matter how a girl pretended to be a man, once she had makeup on, a girl just wanted to be like an ordinary girl, going to the riverside with her beloved to set flowers and boats, worship Xianhe/Immortal harvest[1], steam the fruit, and visit the temple fair. She had heard that there are fireflies on the mountain.

She mustered up the courage to request Xu Zhiheng for the first time, Xu Zhiheng smiled and agreed, “Okay.”

But before the Qixi Festival, she went blind. So this matter seemed to have been forgotten, Xu Zhiheng didn’t take the initiative to mention it again, and He Yan also didn’t mention it, thinking that Xu was overwhelmed by her illness and lost this thought. Until the next day, He Wanru passed by her door, smiling and making her put away the lantern Xu Zhiheng gave the previous day.

She only knew that Xu Zhiheng was not at home on the Qixi Festival, not because of official business, but to accompany He Wanru to the temple fair.

Human life is nothing but a morning dew filled with all kinds of white clouds.[2] She didn’t know how she was doing as a man, but she knew, she did a terrible job as a woman.

Just when she was thinking about it, Hong Shan came in from the outside and saw the mandarin pot in her hand at a glance, and casually joked, “Oh, our General gave you a gift for the Qixi Festival! What a good wine, let my brother taste it!”

He Yan was stunned for a moment, then suddenly laughed.

Be it the past or present, now thinking about it, this Qixi Festival, was in fact not that bad. She shared a ride with the General of many women’s dreams, touched his waist, rode his horse, walked the mountain roads while watching the stars, and finally got a pot of elixir for nothing.

This life was not in vain.

[1] Before the arrival of the festival, the girls prepare all kinds of exquisite playthings in advance, using grass, color paper, sesame seeds, rice grains, etc., to make various kinds of flowers and fruits, ladies, artifacts, palace models, and other things. The seeds of grain and mung beans are soaked in a small box to make them sprout, and when the sprouts are more than two inches long, they are used to worship the gods, called “worshiping Xianhe” and “worshiping the vegetable God”

[2]Life is short-lived be short-lived, fleeting, ephemeral, transitory with all kinds of ups and downs

# Chapter 77: **Punishment**

Zheng Xuan and the other two recruits were standing beside the martial arts field of Liangzhou Guardhouse. Seeing Xiao Jue approaching, Shen Han hurriedly stepped forward and said, “General.”

“I heard that the person was found?” Shen Han asked.

“Liang Ping is watching.”

Shen Han breathed a sigh of relief. Now He Yan was under suspicion. If he suddenly disappears, it might not be intentional. It’s always safe to keep the people under suspicion under the nose.

But now that the person is found, it’s time to consider another matter.

“Zheng Xuan said that He Yan crossed the mountain by himself, and Shen Hong said that He Yan went there to rescue Zheng Xuan, general the truth…” Shen Han asked.

Xiao Jue, “Zheng Xuan is lying.”

Shen Han was taken aback.

“There were horseshoe marks on the road over the mountain, and I also found the traces of the wolf pup being killed.” Xiao Jue said, “He Yan was indeed saving people.”

Shen Han’s face sank, “In that case, Zheng Xuan and the others are really unethical.” Such new recruits, no matter how good they are, once on the battlefield in the future, who knows if they will temporarily turn against each other. Soldiers can die by the enemy’s sword, but they mustn’t stab their own fellow soldiers in the back.

“However,” Shen Han thought of another thing, “If He Yan’s words were indeed true, can he be cleared of the suspicion?” If He Yan is such a person who can ignore his life for the sake of his comrades, perhaps he should be viewed in a new light.

“No.” Xiao Jue’s indifferent voice answered him, “He killed a wolf with his bare hands in a pit/trap on the mountain. This is not to be underestimated,” he raised his eyebrows, “I fear he has a secret.”

Shen Han didn’t dare to say anything. Although Liangzhouwei was thousands of miles away from the capital, the situation was complicated now, and no one dares to take it lightly.

Shen Han looked at Zheng Xuan and other several people. They were sitting far away, and at this moment they were looking at their side frequently with uneasy expressions. Although Zheng Xuan tried his best to stay calm, he didn’t know that his lie had been exposed.

“How does the general plan to deal with these people?” Shen Han asked.

“They were out of the line, playing back and forth being presumptuous, with good tongue and sharp teeth, arrogantly presuming what’s right and wrong,” Xiao Jue’s expression remained unchanged, his voice calm, “The crime of slandering the comrade, they should be beheaded”

Shen Han’s heart trembled, and he bowed his head, “Yes!”

    …

When He Yan woke up the next day, the sun was already up, and there was no one in the house. She sat up, staring at the sunlight through the window in a daze.

Someone pushed the door and walked in. He Yan raised her eyes to see that it was the physician girl Shen Muxue from yesterday. He Yan asked strangely, “Ms. Shen?”

“This is today’s medicinal soup, you should take it first,” Shen Muxue put the medicine bowl on the small table in He Yan’s room, “The general has already given you medicine for external wounds yesterday, so you can change it every three hours. “

He Yan picked up the medicine bowl on the table, drank it, and asked, “Miss Shen, why are the others gone? They didn’t call me either?”

“I told Instructor Liang that your body still needs some more rest and it’s not convenient to go to the martial arts field to practice today.” Shen Muxue replied.

He Yan replied and looked at Shen Muxue again. This girl is only sixteen or seventeen years old. She has skin like cream and extremely beautiful. The most important thing was that she has a calm and leisurely temperament from the inside out, which makes people extremely comfortable. He Yan looked a little uncomfortable, Shen Muxue lightly frowned, “What’s wrong, little brother?”

“It’s nothing,” He Yan said, “I just think that Girl/Ms. Shen is kind, I seem to have seen you somewhere.”

Shen Muxue was stunned for a moment, then shook her head and smiled, “Little brother and I have never met you before, so you probably remembered it wrong.”

“Okay.” He Yan scratched her head. Seeing He Yan finished drinking the medicine, Shen Muxue took the medicine bowl away and exited the room.

 Suddenly there was an abrupt silence, and He Yan didn’t know what she should do. Fortunately, such a daze didn’t last long, someone knocked at the door.

“Who?” He Yan asked.

A cautious voice rang, “It’s me.”

He Yan was startled, the person’s head was exposed at the door, it turned out to be Shen Hong.

She didn’t know where he came from. His face was very pale, and his lips were blue-purple, not as lively as when she first saw him. He limped in, not daring to look at He Yan’s face, and walked over to He Yan’s bed and said, “I’m sorry.”

He Yan already knew the ins and outs of the matter from Hongshan, and said, “It’s okay, didn’t you tell them the truth?”

“But I… almost…” Shen Hong was full of guilt.

He Yan could understand that a person like Shen Hong, who hadn’t experienced anything before, was timid and panicked when Zheng Xuan threatened him so she said, “Aren’t I fine now?”

Shen Hong nodded silently.

“When you first came in, your walking style was a little strange,” He Yan asked, “What’s the matter?”

“I… I broke the military order and was accused of forty strikes from the batons,” Shen Hong said, “I will be a soldier in the future, but I cannot go to the front.”

He Yan was silent, forty batons, it’s no wonder that Shen Hong’s face was so bad, it was already considered good that he didn’t die.

“What about the rest?”

“Zheng Xuan and the other two… were beheaded… in front of all the recruits…” Shen Hong said with a pale face.

He Yan was not surprised. When she was General Feihong, she had heard of General Feng Yun’s notoriety/infamous reputation, and that the discipline in his army was extremely strict. Once the son of an important official came to join the southern/nanfu army, just for the purpose of making fame, he was decapitated by Xiao Jue because of a violation of military discipline/rule. At that time, the high official was reluctant and told/complained to his majesty, but in the end, it was not settled.

Others might say that Xiao Jue was cruel, but if it weren’t for that, he wouldn’t be able to control the southern soldiers, let alone come to this point today.

“Actually, it’s good not to be a front soldier,” He Yan patted him on the shoulder, “You are gentle and kind, and you wouldn’t dare to kill anyone on the front line.”

Shen Hong smiled reluctantly. He took a large amount of things from his pocket and stuffed it into He Yan’s hand. He Yan looked down and saw that it was a handful of pine nuts.

“You are a good person,” Shen Hong stammered, “I was too cowardly before, I’m sorry, I almost killed you. This handful of pine nuts is for you… you take your time to eat them.”

After that, he stood up and limped out again. As soon as he left the room, Hongshan and his party came in and they bumped into each other. Shen Hong blushed and walked in a hurry. After he left, Hong Shan asked, “Why was that kid here?”

“It should be to apologize,” Mak said, “Hey, Brother Ahe, where did you get the pine nuts?”

He Yan put the pine nuts on the table, “Try them if you want. Why are you guys back so early?”

“The chief Instructor said something today,” Stone said. “We don’t have to run with a heavy load in the future.”

“What’s the matter?” He Yan was surprised.

“We have stayed in Liangzhouwei for an entire summer,” Hong Shan grabbed a few pine nuts and said while peeling them. “The chief Instructor said that they would select some qualified recruits to go to the forward/Vanguard camp.”

He Yan raised her eyebrows. Calculating the time, it was indeed about this time.

“He also said that in another te days or so, we’ll be going to fight in the mountains, for the first place?”

“Fight for the flag.” Shi picked up his words.

“Oh yes, yes, fight for the flag. Whoever competes the best, or whoever is the first, might be selected to join the vanguard/front/forward battalion.” Hong Shan said as he chewed on the pine nuts.

“Brother Ahe must be okay,” Mak raised his cheek, “Brother Ahe is so powerful, he will definitely get in.”

He Yan smiled and shook her head. If it’s just the forward battalion, it’s naturally nothing. But if she wants to enter Xiao Jue’s Nine banner battalion, she was afraid she would have to work hard.

This was really a challenge, and only those who can dominate/are almighty can come first.

# Chapter 78: **Mid-Year Festival**

For four or five days, He Yan did not go to the martial arts field to practice.

In fact, she herself did not take the pain on her leg to heart, but the doctor Shen Muxue of Liangzhou Wei came to give her medicine every day and repeatedly told her not to exercise vigorously. Hong Shan also yelled at the same time, “You need to listen to the doctor. If you get injured again, you wouldn’t be able to get first place on the day of the fight for flags and wouldn’t be able to enter the forward battalion. Don’t cry when the time comes .”

He Yan thought about it, then gave up. She was not in a hurry; it was just for one or two days.

But these days, as long as she was away from the martial arts field, her room would basically be full, as people visiting see her came in an endless stream. Today, Jiang Jiao sent a few sour plums, and the next day Huang Xiong brought a bunch of roasted quails. The most speechless thing was Wang Ba, who couldn’t help himself – when he came, asked the recruits in his room to send half of the gnawed dry buns, which at first glance were the spoils looted from the hands of others. He really regarded the barracks as his own hill.

Even Instructor Liang came twice, and both times he saw He Yan, who was surrounded by the crowd in the spring breeze[full of joy]. He took a look at her table full of food squeezed on  like a mountain, and dropped a sentence sourly[in a jealous manner], “Oh, living a good life.” After that he left, He Yan was also helpless.

It was so noisy, from the time when He Yan’s elbows were scarred and scabbed and her legs couldn’t walk, seven or eight days had passed, and the day of fighting for the flag was getting closer and closer.

On this day, before the sun set, Hongshan, and the others returned. He Yan was surprised and asked, “Why did you leave early from the martial arts arena?”

“Today is July 14th, it’s the Zhongyuan Festival,[1]” Mak answered first. “The head Instructor asked us to get off from the martial arts field earlier and have dinner to set water lanterns by the river to worship our ancestors.”

“This Liangzhou Wei is not that bad, they are even giving people time to worship their ancestors and relatives.” Hong Shan sighed.

He Yan smiled as she knew that this is a tradition in the military camp. When she was in the Fuyue Army, the local government in the garrison would teach people to set up a memorial to pay homage to the soldiers who died in the war. Nowadays, Liangzhou Wei was backed by mountains and rivers, which made it very convenient for water lanterns.

“My eldest brother and I are going to set off the water lanterns for my parents,” Mak told them about their dead parents, but he was not sad, only a little melancholy. Maybe his parents left too early, and the memory was very frail. He asked Hong Shan, ” Brother Shan, are you going to worship?”

“Yes, my mother left early, I’ll put one for my mother.”

Several people looked at He Yan in unison, “Is Brother Ahe going or not?”

Here, He Yan’s identity was probably the most mysterious. She doesn’t like to talk to Mak and others about her family affairs. Hong Shan only knows that He Yan came to the army when he was desperate for the family, but when one looked at his confident appearance on the martial arts field, he felt that He Yan was not a child from an ordinary family.

“Me? I’ll go too.” He Yan lowered her eyes, her tone low, “I also have someone to worship.”

Mak and the others sensed that the atmosphere was not right, so they didn’t dare to ask, and they turned the conversation off and started talking about something lighter.

After dinner, the sun completely set, and the moonlight came out from the dark clouds, as almost all the recruits from Liangzhou Wei came out.

You had to fold the lantern yourself; and the paper was piled up in several big baskets in the martial arts field. He Yan also went to get one. She was not very good at doing these handicrafts, but Mak saw it and folded her a paper into the shape of a lotus lamp in three or five-folds, after that he dropped a short white candle on the center of the lotus lamp and handed it to He Yan, “It’s done!”

“Thank you.” He Yan praised, “You are good at handicrafts.”

Mak smiled embarrassedly, “I used to fold a lot of lanterns with my eldest brother to sell during the Mid-Year Festival. I am used to folding. If the paper was bigger, I could fold a more beautiful and bigger one!”

Shi knocked on his head and said in disapproval, “This is not the time for you to show off.”

Mak stuck out his tongue and ran to the Wulu River with the water lantern in his hand, “I’ll go light up the lantern first, Brother Ahe, hurry up!”

After the beginning of autumn, the weather in Liangzhou became cooler at night. In the morning, it rained, and the coolness was still there. The dense forest on the mountain gave birth to cool frost and dew, and the moon and stars were sparse, making the river water shine bright.

The riverside was already crowded with people who came to worship the ancestors, and the candle flames were twinkling, like ten thousands of silver flowers shining across the river, reflecting the dancing flames. The flaming red lotus floated far away with the thoughts of the worshippers, and turned into a bright spot where the water meets the sky, and gradually disappeared.

“It’s all right here, Brother Ahe…” Mak turned around and was taken aback, “Where is Brother Ahe?”

Hong Shan and Shi looked at each other, “I don’t know, he was here just now.”

He Yan was sitting on the rock in the innermost place by the river. This is not the most open place, so few people put lights on here. She silently looked at the lotus lantern in her hand, and her heart was sour beyond words.

Suddenly she remembered the moment when He Wanru drowned her in the water, and said to her, “You are pregnant.”

At that moment, she was actually more elated than bewildered.

But this joy did not last for a moment before she sank in the Xu family’s pond along with her unborn child.

He Yan always felt that in her previous life, she had never wronged anyone, in the He family, may it be He Rufei or Xu Zhiheng. She had done everything she could, but the only one she felt guilty for was the flesh and blood in her belly. She gave him life, but before bringing him into the world, she killed this possibility due to her own problems. Perhaps when she was a military commander, too many people died under her hands, causing countless sins, and God punished her like this. But God should have only just punished her, so why punish the innocent child? She didn’t even know whether it was a little girl or a little boy in her womb before she died.

He Yan took out the torch, and the sparks of the torch splashed a little on the candle, which instantly lit it. The water lantern slowly bloomed in her hand, and the light of the fire reflected in her eyes, and turned into a small flame. It seemed that  tears were about to fall, as her eyes quickly blurred.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered and said sadly, “You and I, mother and child, have no fate in this life. If there is an afterlife, you must be reborn in a good family and enjoy a happy and worry-free life – never meeting me again.”

“I also…” She put the lantern into the river water, “I will avenge for you.”

The river water gurgled, gently wrapping the little water lantern, and went forward. He Yan stared at it, as it swayed until it converged with the countless light spots, and could no longer tell which lantern belonged to who, before she retracted her gaze as she rubbed her eyes.

“Brother He, I didn’t expect you to be here!” An excited voice sounded behind her, “What a coincidence, you are also here to set off the water lantern!”

He Yan turned around and saw a young man with red lips and white teeth holding a lamp in his arms and walking towards her happily. It was Cheng Lisu.

His clothes were neat and fresh. When he walked to He Yan, he carefully raised the corner of his robe, fearing that he would be splashed by the river, and gave He Yan a handful of lanterns he held in his arms.

He Yan asked, “…Are these the water lanterns you want to set off?”

“Yes!”

 “Why so many?” He Yan was speechless.

“I didn’t have to set off so many, as I don’t know the ancestors of our Cheng family. But I don’t think my uncle will come today, so I will release it on behalf of him. This belongs to my uncle’s grandmother. This is for my uncle’s grandfather’s, this is my…”

He counted them one by one, but there was no trace of sadness, instead, he was so cheerful that people might mistakenly think that he was putting on the Lantern for the Lantern festival instead of the worshiping lantern.

“Wait,” He Yan interrupted him, “Why are you doing it in place of your uncle? Can’t he come by himself?”

“There are so many people, he won’t come.” Cheng Lisu sighed, with a broken heart, and shook his head, “I wouldn’t have come if he would come. Who made him my uncle?”

He Yan felt a little funny, and the pain that had just occurred due to the past  faded. Although Cheng Lisu seemed to have two brain cells less than ordinary people, he was still very serious about the issue of water lanterns. He lit the water lanterns in his hand one by one, solemnly putting them into the river water, and prayed very nervously so that they do not get blown out by the wind, or get overturned by the waves. Fortunately, all went well. The water lanterns gradually drifted farther away.

After putting off the last lantern, Cheng Lisu breathed a sigh of relief. He took a coarse cloth out of his arms and placed it on the stone before sitting on it.

“Liangzhou Wei is quite cool at night,” he muttered, “It was so hot just a few days ago. Since the time I grew up, I have never experienced such a hot summer.”

He Yan burst into laughter. Cheng Lisu used to be in the capital, and Cheng family must have ice blocks to cool off the heat in summer. Staying in the house every day without the sun, of course, it wouldn’t have been as difficult as living in Liangzhou Wei. She asked, “If that’s the case, why did you come to Liangzhou Wei to suffer with your uncle?”

“I can’t help it,” Cheng Lisu spread his hands together, “If I didn’t come out with my uncle, I would have been engaged.”

He Yan was taken aback, “What?”

“Tell you a secret. I escaped from my marriage.” Cheng Lisu curled his lips. “I’m still young, how can I be betrothed? Besides, I didn’t like her, so I ran away.”

He Yan, “…” The child is really going back and forth, but to He Yan’s surprise, Xiao Jue actually promised to bring Cheng Lisu with him. He was not afraid that the Cheng’s family would be dissatisfied with him. After all, he once secretly abducted people. The young master also helped the other young master escape the marriage, even if he is a relative, she was afraid there would be a grievance in their heart.

“You and General Xiao have a very good relationship.” He Yan said carefully.

“It’s not bad,” Cheng Lisu was very proud, “I took the initiative to pester him.”

He Yan felt unbelievable, “Your uncle is so terrible, you can still take the initiative to go over?” It’s amazing, who said that Cheng Lisu was a “loser son”, this kind of tolerance was not something everyone can do. Not everyone could bear the burden of humiliation.

“My uncle is very powerful. If it wasn’t him, I might not be where I am now.”

Maybe the moonlight was very good tonight, and Cheng Lisu was also very excited when talking about the past.

Cheng Lisu’s mother, Mrs. Cheng, was actually just a few years older than Xiao Jue’s mother. Therefore, when Xiao Jue was born, Mrs. Cheng had already been married. So although Cheng Lisu and Xiao Jue were of different generations, the difference in age was not very large.

Although the Cheng family and the Xiao family did not get along very often, they were definitely not indifferent either. However, as a child, Cheng Lisu did not interact with Xiao Jue much. Most of the time, he had seen his uncle Xiao Jing more. Xiao Zhongwu has two sons. The eldest son, Xiao Jing, was weak since young, and was unfit for martial arts. After his body improved, he had already passed the best age to practice martial arts. And Mrs. Xiao didn’t want Xiao Jing to join the military, so Xiao Jing took the path of a civil official.

After Xiao Jue was born, Xiao Zhongwu paid special attention to this son.

Xiao Jue did not fail to live up to Xiao Zhongwu’s expectations and had already revealed his talents at an early age. Xiao Zhongwu took Xiao Jue to the mountains where he was personally taught by four senior scholars. As for what mountain it was, and who were the masters, Cheng Lisu was not clear. In the end, he would only see him once a year, and sometimes not even once.

After Xiao Jue was fourteen years old, he went down the mountain and returned to Su Zhou, entered Xianchang Hall, and studied arts and martial arts with Su Zhou’s noble children. Cheng Lisu was nine years old that year and was kidnapped by kidnappers when he went out to play with his friends at the Mid-Autumn Festival. At his age, it was reasonable to say that the kidnappers were old, but his life was delicate and precious, like a silver doll on a traditional painting, so the abductors took him out of the city. Cheng Lisu was told not to scream, so he could only shiver while being kept hidden in the carriage.

He cried when he woke up, ate with tears, and went to sleep. One time, he didn’t know how long it took him to wake up from his sleep. The sound of fighting came from outside the carriage. Cheng Lisu bumped his nose and was swollen when the carriage stopped…

He hurriedly opened the curtain of the carriage and climbed out, and saw the dead who fell to the ground, all with swords in their throats. There was not only one kidnapper who took him. There were dozens of them. The kidnapped children were all tied up and stuffed in a carriage. At this moment, some of them fell out, and some were still in the carriage. A group of people was crying. In the chaos, Cheng Lisu climbed out tremblingly, and then came across the corner of a snow-white robe.

He raised his head, looked up, and saw a handsome young man in a snow-white robe standing in front of him, holding a long sword which was like frost and snow, dripping blood. The blood was gorgeous, but not as bright as the young boy’s lips, the man’s expression was calm, as his eyes fell on him.

It looked like the scene of a fierce painting, but Cheng Lisu felt a little relieved inexplicably. He tremblingly hugged the leg of the young man, learning from his mother’s tone when talking with others, with some flattery, “Dare, dare to ask what is the hero’s last name and where he lives. I am the young master of Cheng’s mansion. You have saved me, our mansion will surely reward you.”

The corners of the boy’s mouth twitched, as he looked down at him condescendingly, his eyes were clear without any ripples, and he said coldly, “I am your uncle.”

“I only knew then that he was my little uncle whom I have never met.” Cheng Lisu looked at the moon, “I thought at the time, this little uncle is really amazing.”

Xiao Jue rescued him and the young children who were abducted by the kidnappers. Cheng Lisu felt that there was such an amazing uncle, so he wanted to stick to him. But Xiao Jue didn’t like this little nephew very much. After sending him back to Cheng’s house, he never visited him again. Cheng Lisu sent him an invitation to come to the mansion as a guest, but Xiao Jue never came once. Besides, Xiao Jue was also very busy. The times when Cheng Lisu saw Xiao Jue, were actually very few.

He Yan thought of the scene described by Cheng Lisu and wanted to laugh inexplicably. It was really helpless to think that Xiao Jue had such a nephew.

“Then how did you get close afterward?” He Yan asked.

If it was just a life-saving grace, as Cheng Lisu said, it did not greatly improve their relationship, then something must have happened later making the uncle and nephew be able to come to Liangzhou Wei together.

“In fact, our Cheng family, including my mother, relatives, and friends who know the Xiao family, don’t really like uncle.” Cheng Lisu said, “They like elder-uncle more.”

The two sons of the Xiao family were born to Wei Wanli. The eldest son Xiao Jing was also born with a good appearance. The son was like jade, humble and clear. From the perspective of temperament alone, it would be more comfortable to get along with Xiao Jing. But it shouldn’t make anyone dislike Xiao Jue.

“Why?” He Yan asked, “Didn’t General Xiao save your life. If he’s your savior, your mother definitely won’t dislike him, right?”

“That’s true, but the time for my uncle and our relatives to meet was really too short, and people didn’t know him well.”

Before Xiao Jue was fourteen, he rarely stayed in Su Zhou. After he turned fourteen, he entered the Xianchang Hall. Not to mention relatives and friends, even Mrs. Xiao was not very close to this son. Cheng Lisu knew that there were several times when Mrs. Xiao talked to her mother, as she was worried about how to get along with this little son.

Since they didn’t know how to get along, people would naturally have many prejudices. Xiao Jue was originally lazy and didn’t like to socialize with others. Compared with his warm and gentle brother, the contrast was more vivid. But as He Yan said, this is not enough to make anyone dislike a person, the actual dislike started when Xiao Zhongwu died after the battle of Mingshui.

Xiao Zhongwu’s death came suddenly, and it was a huge blow to the Xiao family. Mrs. Xiao had never experienced wind and rain. After Xiao Zhongwu’s death, Mrs. Xiao took advantage of the situation and committed suicide by hanging on a beam and followed her husband along, leaving behind her only two sons.

The two sons of the Xiao family, Xiao Jing and Xiao Jue – Xiao Jing was in grief, but Xiao Jue did not shed a single tear. After the general and his wife were buried, the first thing Xiao Jue did was to go to the Jinluan Temple to present his case, to hold the military power of the Nine Banner Battalion soldiers in his palms.

Mrs. Xiao’s death never even passed the first seven days when he took Nine banner battalion[Jiuqi] soldiers to Southern Barbarians Rebellion. Xiao Zhongwu died in the Battle of Southern Barbarians that day. Some people said he was avenging his father, while others said he was eager for quick success. Whether it was the death of his father or the love of his mother, Xiao Jue did not show excessive sadness. So the sign of indifference and a heart hard as iron was stamped on him.

The second young master Xiao Jue, who was noble and precious, went missing from the capital. Others could only learn about Xiao Jue’s current situation from the few words that came back from the battlefield. Rumor has it that he was a young killer, and countless people had died under his sword. He was labeled as even more harsh and unkind.

“Have you heard of Zhao Nuo?” Cheng Lisu asked.

He Yan faintly felt that the name was familiar, but she didn’t know where she had heard it before, so she shook her head and said, “I don’t know.”

“Zhao Nuo is the eldest son of the current Minister of revenue. He was once an envoy of Jing province.” Cheng Lisu said, with a sad expression. “In fact, the Cheng family, as well as the Xiao family’s and relative’s misunderstandings of Uncle, was because of this person.”

[1] Mid-year festival/Hungry Ghost Festival is the name of Taoism, folk called secular July and a half, July 14 OR 15 worship Festival, known as the Buddhist Obon. Holiday customs mainly worship, put lanterns, worship spirits of the dead, burning paper ingots, and sacrifice a land. It can be traced back to the worship of ancestor spirits and related sacrifices in ancient times.

# Chapter 79: **Adolescence**

Back then, when Xiao Jue took the Nanfu[southern] soldiers to Jing Province. Although the world knew that the second son of Xiao was excellent in both martial and civil/politics/literature, but in the end, the young can not afford to take up the heavy responsibility. Zhao Nuo was an official envoy of Jing province, who was lustful and greedy for money, without any learning, and was skillless. When Xiao Jue first arrived in Jing province, he did not take Xiao Jue into consideration; he was often rude and made jokes about him. During the battle of Jing province, Xiao Jue led his troops to the battlefield while Zhao Nuo was in the rear. Fearing for his life and death. He commanded wrongly and delayed the battle, causing many soldiers to die innocently. Seeing him so rampant/insolent, Xiao Jue had him tied up and taken down.

 Zhao Nuo’s father was the head of the War/military affairs. He himself had stayed in Jing province for many years. Naturally, countless people interceded. There was no shortage of high-ranking officials and nobles. They threatened and lured Xiao Jue, who was young and was unaccompanied[didn’t had friends] here.

“He is the official envoy of Jing province. His father is the minister of the revenue/financial depart. Don’t you know, many people in the court have good relations with the Zhao family, if you offend him, it will be difficult for you to move in the future!”

Xiao Jue was unmoved, only smiled contemptuously, “But the minister is so rampant, even if he’s a prime minister, this marshal will still behead him.”

Three days later, Xiao Jue led his troops to surround Zhao Nuo’s mansion and pushed Zhao Nuo to be beheaded under the monument hall of the fallen soldiers.

“The Zhao family was actually intimate with the Xiao family and the Cheng family,” Cheng Lisu recalled, “That Zhao Nuo, logically speaking, had some relatives with us. My mother wrote letters in person at the time asking uncle to open up and separate the line of work from personal.”

“But uncle didn’t listen to them.” He smiled, a little helpless, and a little proud.

“General Xiao acted in such a way, wasn’t he afraid of provoking His majesty?” He Yan thought for a while, “His Majesty would have been dissatisfied too, right?”

“As expected of my elder brother, asking the same questions as me.” Cheng Lisu said openly, “I also think my uncle’s move was a little too rash.”

After a long time later, when the young man had already put away his flirtatious way, turned into introverted, calm, and a high-ranking commander of the right army. Cheng Lisu asked, “Uncle, were you not afraid that His Majesty will be dissatisfied with you because of this?”

The young man was reading a book. He just smiled when he heard the words, and said indifferently, “He doesn’t dare.”

The emperor did not dare, no, rather the courtier was not afraid.

In fact, it was indeed the case. Even though the officials in the court had all said bad things about him, even the people from the mansion of the minister of revenue went to the golden palace asking for punishment one by one, but in the end, it was nothing. All because Xiao Jue took the Nanfu[Southern] soldiers and defeated the Nanban[southern barbarians] steadily.

At the time of hiring people, a dead envoy, or a talented officer who’s one in a million, Emperor Xuanwen was not blind, so naturally, he knew how to choose.

However, Emperor did not dare to convict Xiao Jue, does not mean that the gossip did not spread in the capital. Thus the feud between Zhao Tong, the minister from the Ministry of revenue, and Xiao Jue, was formed. People who had good acquaintances with Zhao Tong naturally did not see Xiao Jue well. And the people who had a good relationship with the Xiao family invariably alienated Xiao Jue.

For the reason, that he has a cold and harsh temperament, and he can even behead his own relatives without mercy. Secondly, he is arrogant, even his Majesty doesn’t pay attention to him, he will inevitably offend others in the future, and he may involve his relatives and friends around one day.

The Cheng family and the Xiao family were relatively close relatives, so they didn’t cut off their contact, but they liked to associate with Xiao Jing than Xiao Jue.

“My mother told me not to get too close to my uncle,” Cheng Lisu said, “She said he doesn’t care about family affection.”

He Yan thought for a while, “General Xiao is not that kind of person, right.”

“I know.” Cheng Lisu smiled, “I’ve always known.”

The two sons of the Xiao family, the eldest son of the Xiao family, was blessed with bright breeze[or you can say he was clear-headed], humble and gentle, and you can get along with him like a spring breeze[easily]. As he is more friendly and enthusiastic, and everyone loves him. The second son is outstanding in appearance and talent, but it was probably to be fair, the temper/nature is not very pleasing.

What’s more, after the beheading of Zhao Nuo, Xiao Jue’s reputation for “Jade-faced Governor, Young Killer General” spread, and others did not dare to look up. Of course, Zhao Tong contributed to this, but Xiao Jue himself also left a lot of rumors. For example, when his parents were buried, he didn’t shed a single tear, and he was busy going to the Golden Palace to argue for military power, and even the first seven days didn’t pass, when he left, Xiao’s first son to clean up the mess.

Every time his relatives get together on New Year’s, just because he doesn’t like to talk to people, he just hurries to the meet and leave.

Cheng Lisu still remembered that it was a summer day, and his eldest aunt Bai Rongwei was entertaining relatives from the Cheng family in the mansion for a summer banquet. The Xiao family was now sparsely populated, and it was rare to have such a lively time.

Cheng Lisu also went with her. At that time, Xiao Jue had been rewarded the title of General Fengyun and had just returned to Shuojing shortly after his eighteenth birthday.

The female relatives were all eating snacks and drinking tea together in the hall, while the men were discussing current affairs with Xiao Jing. Cheng Lisu looked around but didn’t see Xiao Jue.

He was extremely naughty when he was a child and hated ghosts. The teenagers around his age didn’t like to play with him, so Cheng Lisu had fun on his own. He ran to the backyard of Xiao’s house and saw a beautiful orange cat at the entrance of the ancestral hall. He chased the cat and ran all the way behind the screen/fence/wall in the ancestral hall.

 It was summer, and the weather changed at the drop of a hat[fast]. In the evening, there were already dark clouds pressing up on the city, thunder bursting, and suddenly heavy rain poured down.

He held an orange tabby cat in his arms and wanted to go out. When suddenly, he heard people’s footsteps and someone came in.

Cheng Lisu secretly poked his head out from behind the screen, and saw his uncle, who was like a dragon, walking in.

 The young man wore a round-necked robe of stain with raven green clouds and a golden crown on his head. His appearance was as beautiful as jewels. When he was a teenager, he liked to wear white robe, elegant and beautiful, but now he only likes to wear dark clothes as he became older, which makes him look more cold and unpredictable.

Xiao Jue walked into the ancestral hall, picked up three sticks of incense from the side, lit it, and slowly put it on.

Cheng Lisu’s eyes widened.

There were probably all kinds of rumours about Xiao Jue, and Cheng Lisu has heard that Xiao Jue never goes to offer incense to his parents, and was a ruthless person. But now it seems that the rumors were not entirely true.

He moved slowly, but very carefully. First, he wiped the dust off the incense burner carefully, wiping it clean with a cloth, then lit the incense, inserted it into the incense burner, as the green smoke curled up from the incense burner and dispersed in midair. But he didn’t leave, nor did he spoke, he just stood with his eyes down, not knowing what he was thinking.

The summer was hot and humid, the water vapor came in from outside, making the room sticky and greasy, and the thunder became even louder. But the youth constricted his eyes and looked calm. The rainstorm outside washed the eaves, but the house was incredibly quiet. Cheng Lisu didn’t understand what was happening but felt the atmosphere strange for some reason. He didn’t dare to get out of the atmosphere. He held the cat and sat behind the screen and sat with his cold little uncle for more than half an hour.

After a long time, the rain stopped and Xiao Jue left the ancestral hall.

From the time he entered the ancestral hall to when he left, he only had three sticks of incense. He didn’t say anything, didn’t do anything, just waited quietly. But it was these three incense sticks that allowed Cheng Lisu to perceive the completely different softness beneath his uncle’s harsh appearance.

He was not the ruthless person that people say he is.

There are many people in the world whose sincerity is always hidden under the appearance of coldness, but it is not like they’re without them. They are just not good at expressing themselves, making light of their feelings.

Others always say that Cheng Lisu is still like a child, innocent and naive, but in the eyes of a child, he can actually distinguish between good and evil. He doesn’t think that his little uncle is as mean as his mother said. He likes this uncle, more than the first son of Xiao’s.

 “My uncle is very good,” Cheng Lisu looked into her eyes seriously and said, “If you spend a long time with him, you will also like him.”

He Yan laughed and couldn’t help but rubbed his head, “I know, I’ve known that for a long time too.”

    …

Thousands of miles away, in the capital, today’s Chun Lai river, was also full of stars and sparks.

The water lantern reflected by the water lit up the water surface, and it was difficult to distinguish between the earth and the sky[which was is the real light]. Today, it was also drizzling, so a small paper cover was made on the water lantern to save it from being extinguished by the rain.

 Someone was offering incense in the ancestral hall of Xiao Mansion.

Since the death of Xiao Zhongwu and his wife, the number of subordinates in the general’s mansion has been reduced. There were only two sons. Xiao Jue has not been in the mansion for many years. In the end, there are only Xiao Jing and his wife, and there was no need for so many people to serve. It was clean on weekdays, but only occasionally, it is a bit deserted.

Xiao Jing was dressed in a jade-colored robe, he was as tall and gentle as a green bamboo, standing with Bai Rongwei beside him, and everyone was admiring the fairy couple. The incense curled up, the autumn rain was lingering outside, and the cool breeze was blowing. He took off his cloak and put it on Bai Rongwei, and said warmly, “It’s cold, be careful of the cold.”

“I’m not cold.” Bai Rong  Weismiled slightly at him, worrying, “I don’t know what the weather is like in Liangzhou.”

“Tonight is the Mid-Year Festival,” Xiao Jing looked at the drizzle in the yard and said, “It would have been nice if Hua Jin was in the house…”

“He won’t come to the ancestral hall,” Bai Rong Wei shook her head slightly, “he never enters the ancestral hall.”

“He will enter.” Xiao Jing replied very positively.

Bai Rongwei looked at him in surprise, “But I have never seen him…”

“It’s raining today, there is thunder,” Xiao Jing smiled, “He will enter.”

“Dear, I don’t understand.” Bai Rong Wei was slightly puzzled.

“When Huai Jin was very young, he was taken to the mountains by father to be taught by scholars/masters.” Xiao Jing took her hand and whispered, “It is rare for us to see him a few times throughout the year. He is so proud and our mother didn’t like him dancing with swords and sticks. In fact, the relationship between Huai Jin and mother has never been good.”

Mrs. Xiao was the [empress dowager’s]queen mother’s niece. The marriage was given to him by the queen mother. Xiao Zhongwu was handsome and mighty, and Mrs. Xiao liked him very much. But after getting married, the contradictions between the two gradually emerged. Mrs. Xiao was a delicate flower that grows up in the house and cannot bear the slightest grievance. In the end, Xiao Zhongwu was a military commander. He was not as careful and thoughtful as a family member. Although he has never accepted a wife or concubine, he sometimes made Mrs. Xiao dissatisfied.

The two of them quarreled the most during the years was also due to the matter of Xiao Jue.

Mrs. Xiao didn’t want her two sons to take up martial arts. She had no eyes on the battlefield. She didn’t like killing and blood and believed in Buddhism and kindness. In the beginning, Xiao Jing missed the best time to practice martial arts due to physical reasons, so he had to do avoid it. As for Xiao Jue, Xiao Zhongwu has always regarded him as his future successor since he was a child.

Mrs. Xiao didn’t want her son to follow Xiao Zhongwu’s old path, but for the first time Xiao Zhongwu, who was obedient to Mrs. Xiao, did not listen to his wife’s dissuasion.

The son has been separated from his mother for too long, and even if he has blood ties, he was still a bit distant. Moreover, Xiao Jue was not as good and docile as Xiao Jing when he was a child and occasionally showed a shameless side. Facing this cold and arrogant son, Mrs. Xiao also didn’t know how to get along with him.

Mrs. Xiao showed good wishes to Xiao Jue, and Xiao Jue’s performance was also light/indifferent. Madam Xiao likes tea and poems, but Xiao Jue likes to practice sword and horse riding. Although Xiao Jue was also very good in poems, but in the end, it was Xiao Jing who accompanies Madam Xiao.

“My mother told me in private that she was actually a little afraid of Huai jin.” Xiao Jing seemed a little funny when he said this. “She didn’t deliberately go to Huai Jin to talk afterward, and the two of them were always very polite when they got along.”

“Huaijin is actually very pitiful.” Xiao Jing’s smile became sad.

“My father had a cold temperament and was not half tolerant towards Huaijin. I learned later that he had suffered a lot in the mountains. He didn’t say, we all thought he had a very good life. If it were me, I probably wouldn’t have lasted long, and it won’t be long before I would’ve escaped/fled.” He laughed mockingly.

Bai Rong Wei patted his hand comfortingly, “Nonsense, you can do just fine.”

Xiao Jing remembered the year Xiao Jue had just come down from the mountain. He asked this younger brother, “How was the mountain?”

The boy stretched his waist and smiled lightly, “Not bad.”

The three words “not bad” hid all the hardships he has suffered, and the only thing left outside was a high-spirited Young Master Xiao.

“Others say that my father is strict while my mother is loving, but my mother didn’t always stay with him. He finally came back, but she was too polite because she was afraid of him. My mother thought he liked sweets, so she often made them for him. Huai Jin ate those sweet-scented osmanthuses every time, even I was deceived. Later, his close followers told that Huai Jin never eats sweets.”

“Because this was the way his mother expressed his love for him, so he ate. Even if he didn’t like it, even though no one has ever asked him what he likes to eat.”

Bai Rong Wei sighed slightly without speaking.

“Although I am his eldest brother, it seems that I have never helped him in anything. Others always say that he is ruthless and unrighteous, not as good as me, but I know that the reason why I can be the bright and beautiful young man today is precisely because he has undertaken a lot for me. I understand the truth, and he understands it too.” He smiled bitterly, “I now regret that my father didn’t let me join the martial arts. If I hadn’t become a civil servant, perhaps today who would have carried the burden of the Xiao family today would have been me. Huai Jin doesn’t have to be misunderstood by outsiders.”

“We all know that Huaijin has worked hard.” Bai Rong Wei said softly, “Father and mother will know too.”

Xiao Jing looked at the memorial tablet on the ancestral hall and said, “When he was a child, Huai Jin was not very close to his mother. He ran out in two days. In fact, he actually had her in his heart.”

“My mother was timid by nature, easily frightened, and most afraid of thunder. Every time when there was thunder, if Huai Jin is in the house, he will find a reason to sit in her mother’s room. Every time she sees Huai Jin, she thinks about how to get along with Hui Jin and forgets about the thunder. When the rain would stop, Huai Jin would leave.”

“I didn’t understand at first. But once there was thunder and rain, I was outside with him, and he suddenly said that he had to go back to his house as if he had something important. When he got back to the house, he said that he wanted to eat sweet-scented osmanthus candy, so mother was busy serving him. When she was cooking, I suddenly realized that Huai Jin, this guy, was just afraid that his mother would be frightened by the thunder, so he deliberately found an excuse to come back.”

When Bai Rongwei heard this, she also laughed, shook her head, and said, “Huaijin is really…”

“It’s a pity that when mother died, she didn’t know what Huai Jin thought of her.” Xiao Jing said in a cold tone, “If she knew it, maybe it won’t be the result today.”

Bai Rongwei squeezed his hand firmly, “Mother’s spirit in heaven will understand.”

“He was with his mother before his death, and after her death too. As long as he is in the house, he will come to the ancestral hall to accompany mother whenever there are thunder and rain.” Xiao Jing smiled slightly, “This is a secret, I didn’t tell anyone, I think Huai Jin doesn’t want others to know.”

Xiao Jue was too proud. He did these things like gentle spring rain, moisturizing things silently, but he didn’t exact any results. But in the end, after thinking about it seriously, he felt that he was the one who was owed the most.

“That’s why you said that if he were in the capital today, he would also come to the ancestral hall to accompany his mother.” Bai Rong Wei was slightly stunned.

“He is such a person.” Xiao Jing smiled.

The smoke in the incense burner floated into the air and slowly dispersed without a trace. The people of the past have become the past, those unexported care and companionship, from then on there was no longer a chance to explain.

“My dear, you need to know,” Bai Rongwei took Xiao Jing’s hand and said gently, “Huaijin did these things to keep the Xiao family. Now Huai Jin is far away in Liangzhou, and Xu Xiang’s party still regards Xiao’s family as such. Like a thorn in the eye, you must cheer up and don’t let Huai Jin’s efforts in vain.”

Xiao Jing was taken aback, then smiled, and he said, “I know it naturally.”

“I know you love Huaijin,” Bai Rongwei softened her voice, “but I also feel sorry for you. Huaijin has a lot of responsibility, so do you, right? Xu Xiangming has been suppressing the Xiao family secretly, looking for your mistakes, How can it be easy for you? You also have to be cautious in every step of yours.”

“Don’t worry,” Xiao Jing smiled, “The hardest time has passed.”

Bai Rong Wei was stunned for a moment, and then smiled, “You are right.”

The rain continued to patter, and the yard inside the capital was soaked. While thousands of miles away in Liangzhou, a person was leaning against the window. His blue silk hanging over his shoulders, like silk and satin, his expression faint. There was a low voice in the distance, not knowing who was playing the minor tune of his hometown. He listened and smiled softly.

This smile was a little self-deprecating, and a little lonely. After a while, he closed the window isolating the night outside.

The lights in the room swayed slowly, reflecting his star-like pupils. On the table, there was a long wooden plate with scattered rice grains. The rice grains were in different places, and small flags made of red angular cloth were placed.

The coaches Shen Han and Liang Ping were all in the room, gathered around the table, staring at Xiao Jue’s movements.

“Captain, these are the places where the flags were planted? Isn’t it too much?”

“Not much.” The young man with a jade figure was holding a chess piece, and pointed at the topmost red flag, “Seven days later, the battle for the flag will begin on the Baiyue Mountain.”

# Chapter 80: **Fighting for the Flag**

Seven days was enough for He Yan’s leg injuries to heal. Although the injuries on her hands were not completely healed, as long as she didn’t try to pull the crossbow and practice the spear, it would not hinder her daily work.

In these seven days of waiting, the day to fight for the flag finally came.

Liang Ping visited He Yan during the first night of the flag fight and asked He Yan how she was. He Yan was afraid that he would not let her participate in the flag fight, and said hurriedly, “Very good, excellent, very, very good. Do you want to have a go with me/play two moves with me[she wants to say if he would like to fight with her as practice] Instructor Liang?”

Liang Ping thought about the match of mounted archery with He Yan before, and couldn’t help but coughed lightly, “No, if you are fine, you can accompany others up to the mountain tomorrow.”

After he left, He Yan almost cheered out loud.[because of excitement]

Hong Shan smiled and said, “Now you have got what you wanted.”

“I don’t know what it is like to fight for the flag,” Mak looked at He Yan and pleaded, “After Brother Ahe comes down from the mountain, you can tell us word by word.”

“Isn’t your brother going up the mountain too? Why just ask Ahe?” Hong Shan said.

“My brother doesn’t talk much.” Mak curled his lips.

Liangzhou Wei had tens of thousands of new recruits. Of course, not everyone can go up the mountain to fight for the flag. Moreover, it is to select people for the forward camp/battalion, so only the people with outstanding performance in the martial arena are selected. Both Mak and Hongshan can only be regarded as mediocre, so they were not eligible for competing for the flag. The only people selected in their room to go up to the mountain were Shi and He Yan.

“The injuries on your hand haven’t healed yet.” Hong Shan worried for He Yan, “When the time comes, don’t try hard. You can run away if you can’t fight, okay? All Liangzhou guards know you are great, so don’t care about winning or losing at that time. .”

“It’s too much of a loss for Brother Ahe,” Mak said, “If it wasn’t for Brother Ahe who was injured, he would definitely be first.”

“It’s okay.” He Yan said relievedly, “Even if I am injured, I would still be first.”

When the others in the room heard this, they all burst out laughing.

“Here we go again! Our Great Ringmaster is going to set up a ring on the mountain again, is there anyone who wants to bet on dry cakes?”

“Bet my ass, even the last loss hasn’t been paid yet!”

Amidst the noise, He Yan’s heart relaxed a little bit. In fact, she hadn’t competed for the flag for a long time, and the memories of the last flag fight were not too good, as she wasn’t the best at that time. But no one knows what the result would be this time.

It’s just that compared to the result of the flag race, the most important thing is the performance in the flag race. If one wants to enter the Nine Banners battalion, only the result of the race is not sufficient. Inside the Baiyue Mountain, all the Instructors would be hidden in the dark, to take in the performance of each of them. The person who performs the best might have the opportunity to enter the Nine Banners battalion.

Therefore, instead of a competition, it is more of a play, and the audience is only one person from beginning to end, that is, the second son of Xiao. She had to work hard to win Xiao Jue’s favor by taking every step beautifully and thoughtfully.

She should be able to do it.

 …

Outside the guardhouse, Shen Han arched his hand toward Xiao Jue, “General, everything is ready.”

Lu Er/Green ears stomped twice on the ground next to him, as Xiao Jue stroked its head and said, “Let’s go.”

Shen Han nodded, and suddenly remembered something, ” What about Master Cheng…”

“I have sent someone to protect him from the shadows. No need to worry.” He looked in the direction of Baiyue Mountain, “It’s almost time, tell them to depart immediately.”

 Shen Han responded, “Yes.”

…

He Yan came to the martial arena, she didn’t see Liang Ping, but saw Du Mao, holding a book in his hand, and marking the names of He Yan and Shi, after that the two went forward and found Jiang Jiao, Huang Xiong and Wang Ba standing aside.

“A group of five people would be formed for the competition, and you all are in the same group.” Du Mao said, “After a stick of incense, you will set out on foot from here to Baiyue Mountain. You cannot cross the mountain. Red flags are planted everywhere in the mountain. Before sunset, you must return to this place. “After a pause, he said again, “There are 30 groups of recruits going up the mountain in this flag fight. After returning to this place, the group with the most red flags would be the winner.”

“There are weapons on the weapon rack. Quickly pick the one you can use. Bows and crossbows are not allowed. Don’t hurt your fellow soldiers when fighting for the flags on Bai Yue Mountain. Don’t risk your life, don’t prioritize friendship if the friend is an opponent. “

Several people nodded together.

Jiang Jiao chose the long spear he was good at, and Huang Xiong carried his golden-backed sword. Although Wang Ba was good at bows and crossbows, he could not use them in this battle. So he chose crested axe which looked cool. Shi took an iron-headed stick, and everyone looked at He Yan, thinking that He Yan was going to take the mandarin duck knife, but she took a nine-section whip from the rack.

“You…” Shi hesitated. They all knew that He Yan was good at knives, crossbows, and spears, but they didn’t know how good she’s at using whip. A whip is not as good as a sword in terms of power.

“You’ll know when you get to the mountain.” He Yan smiled, “Let’s go.”

Several people each took their weapons and rushed towards Baiyue Mountain.

Du Mao laughed loudly behind them, “I’ll be waiting for the good news here. Go, Boys!”

The birds in the forest were so startled that they flew around everywhere, while the people disappeared into the forest in the blink of an eye. Ma Damei and Liang Ping were afar, each holding the reins of their horses, as Ma Damei said to Liang Ping, “The time is almost here, let’s set off.”

…

Thirty groups of people, more than 100 recruits in Baiyue Mountain, like a fish into the sea, no one could be seen. As soon as they stepped into the woods, Wang Ba suddenly spoke out, “Wait!”

Several people stopped and looked at him, “What?”

“Someone has advanced to the mountain before us. What if they are in an ambush in the forest at this moment and we step on a trap?”

“Don’t worry,” He Yan smiled, “The fight for the flag has just begun. Everyone is busy grabbing the flag. We don’t have a flag in our hands right now. What’s the use of ambushing us. I guess at this moment, everyone would be heading to… white rocks at the mountain’s south [this place is written as shan nan baishi].”

“Why there?” Jiang Jiao asked.

“Shi, show them the map.” He Yan looked at Shishi.

Shi took out a roll of paper from his arms and slowly unfolded it, but saw several red dots on the paper, all of which were in general directions. Each group of flag contenders will have a map. The map has the location of the flag, but only the general direction. The map was very scribbled.[had not many details] There were marked for trees or rivers, only had four directions: south, east, north, and west.

“Look, there are a total of twenty flags.” He Yan pointed to the bottom red dot, “The side closest to the foot of the mountain should be the side of the mountain. When recruits enter the mountain, they will naturally search for the nearest flag first, trying to put it in the pocket. There is a small stream beside the white rocks in the south of the mountain. It is wide open and not covered by trees. This flag should be the best one to find. So I think most of the brothers who are ahead of us have gone to look for this flag. “

“How do you know it is in Mountain’s south white rocks?” Huang Xiong suspiciously asked, “There is only one dot on this.”

 “I’m just guessing, but don’t worry. When I visited the mountain before, I remembered the way, so even if there are deviations, I will be able to find it after looking for it a little.

“Didn’t you get chased by a wolf the time you patrolled the mountain before?” Wang Ba couldn’t help but said, “You still remember the way?”

“Well, I watched the way when I was getting chased by the wolf, and when I came back, I remembered it again, so I’m very familiar with it.” He Yan smiled and looked at him, “You have to trust your boss, there would be absolutely no problem.”

When Wang Ba heard this, he turned his head in anger, not looking at He Yan.

He Yan laughed. It is necessary to remember the terrain and all roads on the battlefield. She had spent time in the forward battalion. The most important thing is to understand the enemy and the surrounding environment at the beginning, so as to judge the layout.

“Then what are we waiting for now? Let’s go directly to the mountain’s south white rocks and grab the flag!” Huang Xiong carried the knife on his back, “How to go, ah?”

He Yan, “…” This is one ignorant fellow.

“We are not going in this direction.” He Yan said.

“Why?” Huang Xiong frowned.

“At this moment, there must be a lot of people there grabbing the same flag. If you want to grab the same flag, we would have to face too many opponents, which is not worthwhile.” He Yan shook her head, “Don’t just try to join in the fun, instead let’s go in this direction.” She pointed in the opposite direction on the map, where there was also a red dot.

“The forest is dense here, the road is very steep, so it’s easy to get lost. I thought about it. Unless it is someone who remembers the road clearly, it would be difficult to find this flag. So it should not be easy to take it away. Let’s go straight there and take down this flag first.”

“There are only twenty flags in total. I think we can win as long as we get more than half of them. So in the beginning, we’ll for these hidden flags, as nobody would pay much attention to them, saving some of our efforts. After all, it’s a matter of fighting for the flag. It’s not the strength of the hand which should be used but this.” She said while pointing to her head.

Is this a way to complement oneself for being smart? Several people were a little speechless. Huang Xiong asked, “Do you really remember the way?”

“It’s true.” He Yan blinked and said, “I don’ forget the way.”

The young man wore a strong red-colored outfit. Although he was thin and weak, his eyes were extremely sly and agile. The sunlight shining on him from the gap in the forest made his whole person to be shining/glowing…

“Ok, ok, let’s go.” Wang Ba was the first to speak, “Hurry up, otherwise, it’ll be snatched by other if we get there too late, then what would be the point of fighting!”

Shi and He Yan were from the same group, so naturally, they wouldn’t say anything. Jiang Jiao was younger, and he admired He Yan for the fact that he was better than hin in spears, so he had no objection. Several people agreed, so Huang Xiong, the oldest, also didn’t say anything. The most important thing is that he was road blind. If there is no one to lead the way, he might simply spend three days and three nights inside.

So these five people unexpectedly joined He Yan as the head.

The five of them walked up the mountain together. Because there was no horse to ride and the mountain road was rugged, everyone was worried that He Yan would not be able to keep up. However, seeing her lighter figure and relaxed expression all the way, with no reluctance, they gradually relieved. Knowing He Yan’s physical strength, it should be no problem to climb to the top of the mountain.

And as expected, He Yan did as she said, as if she had walked the road of Baiyue Mountain countless times, keeping all kinds of trails in mind. She avoided every possible collision with other groups and walked exclusively on the trails. The road was a little difficult to walk, but the distance was much closer. Moreover, every bush that seemed to be roadless was smashed away by her, making out another path.

“You, you have to think more about everything,” He Yan sighed, “Does the road have to be straight? Isn’t it possible for it to be curved? Do people have to walk on the ground only? Isn’t it okay to learn from gecko [it’s a lizard] to climb on the wall? Rules are dead and people are alive.[1] And if you have snacks, many things are not that complicated at all.”

Everyone, “…”

Huang Xiong said dully, “I am forty-six this year.”

He Yan answered as she walked, “Yes?”

“You are only sixteen this year.”

The implication was that why a 16-year-old brat is lecturing his elders? The elders have eaten more salt than you have eaten rice![2]

He Yan said, “But you still don’t know the way.”

Huang Xiong couldn’t answer these words. What kind of person is this? He’s so thick-skinned and as stubborn as a mule.

As they talked, they climbed over a mound and saw a small flag hidden in the bushes, standing alone on the ground.

“Found it!” Jiang Jiao’s eyes lit up, and he stepped forward to hold the banner in his palm, “It’s really there!”

“It’s really been found.” Wang Ba murmured, seeing the young man leaning against the tree, and said leisurely, “I said it earlier, I won’t forget the way I passed by.”

Seeing this, the supervisor hiding in the distance of the bushes walked two steps outside and whispered, “What’s going on? Why was it found so soon?”

It stands to reason that the flag here was hidden deeply, and the road was not easy to follow. At the moment, most people should go to the mountain’s south white rock flag. Whereas at this time, their group came straight here from the beginning, and they haven’t even encountered any obstacles on the road. Did they… know where the flag was placed from the start?

“Never mind, just hurry back to report” The supervisor quickly wrote a few words on the note and sealed it in the copper tube on the pigeon’s leg.

    …

In the guardhouse, black and white pieces were scattered on the chessboard, and some people were playing against each other.

A pigeon flew to the young man’s shoulder and groaned/chirped twice. The latter took the copper tube from its leg and took out the note to read it.

Shen Han looked suspiciously.

Xiao Jue handed him the note, and Shen Han took it and took a look. After a while, he was shocked and said, “They found it so soon?”

“Unexpectedly.” Xiao Jue grinned, his eyes clearer, and he said, “From the start, he went straight to this place.”

Among the twenty flags on Baiyue Mountain, the nearest was next to the south of the mountain by the white rock. Although someone had discovered it early, there were too many people who came to grab this flag, and so far there has been no winner. Instead, the one in He Yan’s hand became the first flag to be found, because no one came to grab it.

“He remembers the way?” Shen Han asked suspiciously. Even counting from the beginning of the mountain patrol, it was impossible for one to remember the road so well, and at the beginning, the recruits did not know the meaning of the mountain patrol, so they would not deliberately remember the road. It’s amazing to be able to even remember roughly half of the way.

“Not necessarily, maybe,” Xiao Jue said, “He might have known about the fight of flag ahead of time.”

Knowing it in advance, he would have deliberately noted it down when patrolling the mountain, or if one thinks deeply, He Yan might even have the specific map of Baiyue Mountain right from the start. So when he sees the flag, he will know the specific location.

Shen Han frowned, “Speaking of which, he is really suspicious. What should I do next?”

“Continue,” the young man smiled faintly, moving the chess pieces without hesitation. “It’s not over yet. The outcome is unknown. You won’t know the outcome until the end. Don’t be in a hurry.”

    …

After He Yan found this flag, she took the other four people and continued walking up the mountain. Her path seems to be closer to other people’s, and occasionally she ran into other groups of recruits who she couldn’t avoid. Before the other party could find them out, He Yan let everyone lie in the grass or behind the bushes, trying not to meet them head-on.

Wang Ba was a bit dissatisfied. He was used to being the leader of the mountain bandit. He was never a coward, so he said, “We are not afraid of them, what are we hiding for? I think we should stop hiding, just go straight up and grab it!”

“It’s still early now.” He Yan explained patiently to him, “The other recruits we met may not have flags, but we do have them. Once a conflict occurs, we won’t necessarily have trophies if we win, but might even lose the flags in our hands if we lose. Isn’t it uneconomical/a big loss?”

Seeing Wang Ba was still reluctant, she unfolded the map in her hand to show Wang Ba, “I have seen it. As of now, there are three flags hidden deep in the dense forest. We have already got one, and there are two others left. If we walk along this road, we should be able to find them smoothly. The last one is close to the top of the mountain.”

“We get these three first, and after we get these three, we will be on the top of the mountain.” She said, “Wait until we get to the top of the mountain, then we can discuss what happens after that, in the long run.”

The barely convinced Wang Ba said, “That’s what you said, and there are only two more, if not,” he waved his fist, “I will make you look good! [i don’t know how to phrase he’s kinda threatening her?]”

 He Yan was not afraid, and smiled while removing his fist, “You can’t be so rude to the boss.” She looked at the distance and said, “Let’s go.”

The sun was getting bigger/hotter.

 Although the deep forest was not as hot as the bottom of the mountain, everyone was sweating profusely because of the rugged mountain roads. There were many birds, beasts, insects, and ants on the mountain, and there were also a few snakes on the road. What was surprising was that He Yan was able to deal with these unexpected situations easily. Compared to Wang Ba, she was like the lord of the mountain. If one doesn’t know that He Yan was a recruit from the capital, they’re afraid that others will misunderstand that she was a native hunter born and raised on Bai Yue Mountain.

She didn’t lie either. Although the road she led was a bit bumpy, she actually found the other two flags unimpeded. The last flag was pocketed by Jiang Jiao. Huang Xiong looked at the front and said with some uncertainty, “Ahead is the top of the mountain.”

He Yan nodded, “Yes.” She looked down the mountain, “We took the shortcut and looked along the way, and we didn’t meet any other group who are faster than us. We should be the first to come to the top of the mountain.”

The other recruits were busy fighting for the flag. They avoided other people on the way and only went to find the flag, so it was very convenient and also saved a lot of time.

Wang Ba sat down under the tree, twisted the water bottle around his waist and drank a big sip of water, and said, “Except for killing two snakes along the way, nothing was done. I took two axes for nothing. Are we here to find only, weren’t we here to grab?”

Avoiding others while finding the flags, and sneaking around, was quite stifling. Although Huang Xiong and Jiang Jiao didn’t say anything, they agreed with what Wang Ba said.

Shi opened his mouth and said, “We just have to win, there’s no need to be stick to the way.”

“Brother Shi is smart,” He Yan said with a smile, “If you want to compete, why not go directly to the martial arena to challenge. The challenge for the flag is not a test of personal skills.”

She clapped her hands, looked at everyone, and laughed again, “However, I never said that we should hide here all the time.” He Yan said, “Let’s all get ready.”

“Ready for what?” Jiang Jiao was puzzled.

He Yan smiled slightly, “Robbery.”

[1]How did the rules come about? People set. Therefore, all the rules can be applied flexibly according to the particularity of the matter, and they can be adjusted if they are not illegal. [ Rules ] In fact, you have to achieve your goals…

[2]This sentence is usually the elders who used the lessons of the younger generation, that they have more life experience than you.\

# Chapter 81: **Robbery**

“Robbery?” Jiang Jiao stammered, “What, what robbery?”

“We have already arrived here first, and the time and the place are right, moreover everyone is in fine condition. Wouldn’t we fail/disappoint God if we didn’t rob?” She called Wang Ba, “Brother Wang, you can do your job this time. Do you remember the rules?”

Wang Ba was a little angry, but also a little complacent, only said, “Of course I know!”

“Then let’s go and step onboard first.”

“What does it mean to step onboard?” Jiang Jiao was confused.

“I know this,” Huang Xiong explained to him, “Bandits slang, used before exploring/scouting the surroundings in advance.”

Wang Ba snorted and said to He Yan, “You know the slangs?”

“I only know this one sentence.” He Yan said, “If you all have no objections, how about I make the arrangements?”

All of them looked at her.

“The terrain is high here, and we have arrived early. So I think we should wait for other teams to come here, they will be tired and would want to relax. We just need to wait in ambush here and grab their flags. There are five of us, one of us needs to go up the tree to survey the situation, and the rest of us should lay in ambush here. The person climbing the tree is me,” He Yan pointed to herself, “I’ll be surveying on the tree.”

“When the people will arrive, Brother Wang should be in front to bring the people into the formation. Brother Jiang Jiao and Shi, one of you is holding a long stick, and the other is holding a spear. You both should spread around left and right. Uncle Huang should be behind in the formation, so we can get them surrounded in the middle. After that, I will come down from the tree, and with my nine-section whip, I can take the opportunity to scoop their flag away.”

Everyone suddenly realized. No wonder that He Yan chose a nine-section whip. As the situation would be really chaotic, and there might not be a chance to get close, but as long as the whip was rolled from a distance, the flag could be rolled over/snatched.

“Why should I be a bait?” Wang Ba was dissatisfied, “I can also lead the battle.”

“Because you are the strongest,” He Yan said without changing her expression. “If the rest of us take the flag to draw people, others would doubt, but if it’s you, it would be different. You are already very good among recruits. It’s reasonable, if you are holding the flag, as the best one among the group would protect the flag, so it would be preferable if you hold it.”

Jiang Jiao wanted to laugh a little but finally held back. Shi and Huang Xiong lowered their heads in silence. Only Wang Ba was deeply impressed, and his dissatisfaction with He Yan’s arrangement suddenly disappeared.

“But can this arrangement really work?” Jiang Jiao was a little skeptical, “What if they are better than us?”

“Don’t worry, we have been here first. We have rested longer than them and are full of energy. Moreover, if they are outflanked by our formation, it would confuse them to defend or attack. Moreover, our purpose is not to fight with them, but to fight for the flag.”

“The book of war/military book says: Those who are on the battlefield first and confront the enemy are smart, and those who are on the battlefield later are laborious. Therefore, those who are good at war will lead the enemy to the battlefield, not to the people.”

Of the first five people here, only Jiang Jiao and He Yan have read the book. The others hadn’t reacted yet, but Jiang Jiao looked at He Yan, and asked with a complicated expression, “Have you read the military books?”

 “I know a little.” He Yan replied.

Huang Xiong looked at Jiang Jiao, then at He Yan, and sighed, “I remember you once said that you had read “The Arm records”, and now you are saying that you have read military books. You are so capable, you will surely be very famous one day, not in the same place as us .”

 “I dare not.” He Yan smiled.

“Anyway, don’t forget us, when you get rich and famous.” Wang Ba whispered, probably embarrassed, and added, “But you don’t look like you can get rich.”

He Yan shrugged and said, “Then everyone, let’s find a place to hide. I’ll go up the tree first. You can eat something and rest. Brother Jiang will take the flag to Brother Wang and bother wand would further wait for the sound of my whistle later. The whistle would be used as a signal. As soon as the whistle would sound, Brother Wang would take a flag to lead people over.”

Everyone had no objections. They all scattered around, each finding a place to hide. He Yan found a tall camphor tree and climbed up with her head tilted.

She climbed the tree flexibly. Upon seeing this, Wang Ba murmured, “totally like a four-legged snake.”

He Yan climbed to the top of the tree in one breath, found the lushest and leafy place, and sat down. At this moment, the wind was blowing and the face felt cool, but it was indescribably comfortable. This place was high enough to have a clear view of the surrounding. Seeing no other recruits coming up, she took out a small piece of dry bread from her arms, gnawed two mouthfuls, and drank some water.

After she finished eating this small piece of bread, she lied down on the branch for a few minutes and saw a rustling movement on the nearby path. There was a group of recruits coming up.

He Yan immediately sat up straight, hiding in the leaves, and did not move. She whistled softly in her mouth, blowing three times in succession. Her whistle was the same as the sound of partridges [it’s a bird], and Jiang Jiao and the rest could not tell if they hadn’t listened to it in advance.

Huang Xiong, who was hiding in the dark, winked at Wang Ba, as Wang Ba hung up the kettle, stood up with the flag in his hand, and walked out.

They don’t know if he was used to doing this kind of robbery. As Wang Ba pretended to climb up, looking around every two steps as if he had just arrived here and was exploring the way.

As he walked, he collided with the group of recruits who had come up the mountain.

“You…” Before the recruit had the time to speak, Wang Ba clutched his waist and ran back. It’s okay if he didn’t cover it. But once he covered it, the action would attract people to see the red flag around his waist.

The recruit was taken aback, and then became excited, and said to the people behind him, “He is alone, he has a red flag, brothers, let’s grab it!”

When the group heard this, they immediately chased after him. Wang Ba, who seemed to be alone, not fond of battles, just ran and cursed, “Bah, don’t follow your grandpa! Be careful otherwise I’ll chop you up!”

The group of people regarded the red flag in Wang Ba’s hand as something in their pockets, as they laughed and chased after him, saying, “Then come and chop us up! Brother, surrender the flag, there’s no need to put up a fight!”

“Your grandma would surrender! If you are still chasing after me, I’ll not be polite!” Wang Ba warned.

“Who is being rude to whom?” The group of people smiled and chased after him. When they ran to a dense forest, Wang Ba suddenly stopped.

“Why, can’t run anymore?” The leader of the recruits smiled, imitating the appearance of the bandit leader, “This mountain is under me. If you want to cross from here, surrender all your money!”

Wang Ba originally wanted to show off his authority, but he was directly exasperated when he heard the words. He drew out two giant axes from his waist, turned, and shouted, “Pheasant stubbornly drills, how can he go up to the Tianwang Mountain. Trying to rob your grandfather, I see you it’s because of lard you are blinded, and the tactics are not faint/dim!”

No one could understand his slang series of bandits. Moreover, the other party didn’t want to entangle him too much, so he raised his sword straight toward the flag on his waist.

At this moment, there was a sudden noise behind him. In the grass on the left and right sides, two young men suddenly appeared, one holding a spear and the other holding an iron rod. They were Jiang Jiao and Shi. Hearing another loud noise, the bald-headed man with a gold-backed sword also leaped in front.

Just now it was five against one, as the Wang Ba was getting chased by the ass, but now the situation has changed rapidly, like catching a turtle in an urn/jar. There were ambushers in all directions, four people making a strong formation.

The recruits froze for a moment, their smiles faded, as they said, “It’s an ambush! They tricked us!”

Along the way, either actual knives or spears robbed them, or they were rushed out of a fierce battle from an ambush in the dark. But it’s the first time they were ambushed like this, it was like performing a big show, with a bait in front of them The leader of recruits gritted his teeth, “What are you afraid of? The number is quite the same. I’m afraid that they won’t be able to make it. I’ll fight them!”

As soon as they turned their heads, several people rushed into the melee together.

To be honest, although these people have their own strengths, they were not one in a million. After all, all the recruits on the mountain today were outstanding talents in Liangzhou Wei. But still, Jiang Jiao had the upper hand in the fight.

One of the reason was that they have been up here for a long time, have already rested and eaten here, recharging their energy to full, while the other recruit has just gone through the trek and fell into a melee before even sitting down and drinking, naturally were in a passive position. Secondly, it’s the location of their formation, so they have some advantages.

Jiang Jiao and Shi were on the left and right sides so that these people were surrounded from beginning to end. Huang Xiong’s big sword/knife.dagger was powerful, seamlessly matching with the Wang Ba’s great axes, both long and short, offensive and defensive. The recruits can not find a fault with the other side and were frequently suppressed.

Jiang Jiao shot off the opponent’s sword, knocking down all the opponent’s weapons. One of the recruits said, “No, we can’t get the flag. Let’s withdraw quickly!”

“How to withdraw?” The leader of the recruits angrily said, “You can find a gap for me to try!”

He wanted to break through several times, but he couldn’t find a gap. They were so tired if they continued like this, they wouldn’t be able to hold it anymore.

“Something’s not right,” a recruit avoided Huang Xiong’s dagger/sword, turned his head, and asked, “Why do they have only four people, and where’s the last one?”

Yes, they have been fighting for a long time, and it was five-to-four, and one person was still nowhere to be found, but because they were suppressed too hard, they didn’t notice it. At this moment, after being reminded, they immediately understood. The leader of recruits said, “There is a trap! Pay attention to protect the flag!”

As soon as the voice fell, he heard Wang Ba yelling, “He Yan, you are still watching the show! Still not coming out!”

Suddenly they heard a young boy’s light voice from the leafy camphor tree, “Coming!”

A red-figure suddenly appeared in the dense forest. The teenager laughed, like a swallow passing by, with a light posture, but in the eyes of the other party, he looked like an enemy. Before the man on the far side had time to hide his bag, suddenly a shadow leaped towards his face. He jumped down and let go of his hand subconsciously. The long shadow was like a snake, slithering and flexible, curling away with his bag. The teenager retracted his nine-section whip and sat on the tree, smiling. She shook her hand as the empty bag fell. Holding the flag in her hand, she smiled and said, “Thank you!” She turned her head and disappeared into the jungle, leaving a cry, “Mission accomplished, withdraw!”

The remaining Jiang Jiao and others were still fighting when they received the command. They were not in love with the fight. So they put their spears away and ran away. The other group was already half tired of climbing the mountain and was totally exhausted after the fierce battle. How could they catch up? They tried to chase, but after a few hundred steps, they couldn’t do it well and watched the group of people run away until no figure could be seen.

“What kind of robbery is this…” Someone slumped to the ground tiredly, gnashing his teeth and cursing: “It’s really lawless!”

“There’s no way, a thief will go empty-handed.” At the other end, He Yan was asking Jiang Jiao to put away the red flag in her hand, snapped her fingers, and said, “Let’s go.”

“Where?” Wang Ba asked.

“To rob the next house/one.”

    …

The pigeon was pacing back and forth on the window, as someone spilled some grains of rice in his palm, and the pigeon landed on his palm, obediently letting the person remove the brass/copper tube from his leg.

After reading the note, Xiao Jue handed it to Shen Han, shook his head, and smiled.

The words on the note were very simple, and only one thing was written. He Yan had been setting up ambushes all over the mountain, starting a robbery camp/operation, and snatching the flags of several recruits.

The word “Fight” is the key to fight for the flag, but it was unique in the way they fight was so sneaky but still upright and honest. From the beginning, they only thought about the flag and didn’t want to have a dispute with other recruits at all, so later they set up an ambush and focused on the flag. If one doesn’t have a flag, they didn’t try to fight, letting them pass by. But if one had a flag, they took advantage of the fire and ran away after the robbery.

In the end, the loss was the least and the number of the flag would be the most.

“He’s pretty good at it.” After a long while, Shen Han suffocated these words.

“Not only will it be easy, but he will also be able to use his troops.” Xiao Jue said.

 “Use soldiers?”

“To serve far away with near, to wait for the labor with ease, and wait for the hunger with satiety.” He curled his mouth and said slowly, “The recruits of Liangzhou Wei were all fooled by him.”

Shen Han was speechless. This young man, he really didn’t know what to say about him. He suddenly remembered something, “Speaking of these five people, he became the leader of the group, and still there was no objection.”

In fact, in addition to fighting with other recruits, there were also disputes in every team. Everyone’s habits and tactics were different, resulting in bad harmony. Some teams even fight for the commanding position and end up getting nothing. Knowing how to cooperate and how to arrange can also show the capabilities of the recruits. From this point of view, He Yan already possesses the ability to dispatch/deploy troops.

Among these five people, except Shi, everyone else had conflicts with He Yan, but no one entangled/fought with He Yan for this.

This was also an outstanding point of this young man.

“These people are all good,” Shen Han thought for a while, “Compared to the recruits they fought with, Jiang Jiao and the rest are slightly better. So far, there has been no defeat. Do you think these people qualify for the vanguard battalion/forward camp?”

 Xiao Jue chuckled lightly and did not deny it, “It’s not that they are strong, it’s because He Yan has set up a formation. A squad with a formation and a group of scattered soldiers, are different from each other.”

“The General is saying…” Shen Han seemed to understand.

“The left and right are spread like crane wings, didn’t you see it after the leader was in the formation,” Xiao Jue said, “He used five people to set up the crane wing formation.”

Perhaps the news came too suddenly, Shen Han said nothing for a while. If a recruit can deploy/set up a formation, it almost shows that there is something wrong with this person. Shen Han hesitated for a moment, “Perhaps… a coincidence?”

“Whether it’s a coincidence or not, we’ll know next.” Xiao Jue said, “Fei Nu.”

The blackguard appeared behind him silently, “My lord.”

“Send the letter to the other instructors/commanders on Bai yue Mountain,” he held up the teacup on the table, sipped lightly, “On the way down the mountain, set up a formation.”

“General!” Shen Han was anxious: “This will prevent other recruits from going down the mountain!”

“Don’t worry,” the young man put down the teacup in his hand, then picked up a black piece in the chess box and dropped it. In an instant, he said, “Someone will break the formation.”

    …

On Baiyue Mountain, next to the rocky cliff, several people were hiding in the grass, counting things.

“One, two, three… six! We took a total of six flags!” Jiang Jiao was a little happy.

“It’s less than half,” Wang Ba poured cold water on him, “What’s the point of being happy.”

“Six flags are already pretty good,” Huang Xiong said, “Besides, three sides were still grabbed.”

Three of these six flags were found by He Yan and the others on their own by taking the shortcut, and the rest three were grabbed by ambushing recruits who already had flags near the top of the mountain.

“It’s still not enough, let’s grab some more.” Wang Ba put his axes away, “If we win more than half.”

He Yan shook his head, “Can’t grab it now.”

 Shi frowned and asked, “Why?”

“Now other recruits are going up the mountain one after another. Those recruits who were robbed before will definitely tell people about the flag robbery by us. We might have already become notorious, in the mouths of these people. Those recruits with flags will only become warier of us. Besides, we have robbed three times non-stop. Right now, our physical strength is not as good as before.”

“Who said that?” Wang Ba gestured to the person beside him to look at his powerful arms, “I am still full of strength, not tired at all! I can grab a few more!”

He Yan said, “Oh? What if several groups join forces?”

Wang Ba froze for a moment.

He Yan spread his hands and said, “We have six flags in our hands right now, which are equivalent to becoming live targets. I think the smart recruits on the top of the mountain would have already thought of joining hands and grabbing the flags from our hands. Two fists can’t beat four hands. Five of us, against ten, twenty, thirty…or might even be a hundred people. Do you think there is still a need to compete?”

Everyone was speechless.

“Then you tell me what to do.” After a long while, Wang Ba said impatiently.

“No matter how easy things are in the world, there is always a first and then there will be a second. We have just shown them how to take advantage of the fire. The next recruits will try to do the same. We don’t have to compete with those recruits one by one. We can just compete with the strongest among the remaining recruits.”

Jiang Jiao’s eyes lit up, “You mean, wait for them to snipe each other, and we’ll reap the benefits?”

Let the remaining recruits on the mountain, like the east wind overwhelming the west wind, or the west wind overwhelming the east wind, none of them matters, there is always a team who would win. All they have to do is to rob the winning team and snatch their flag. In this way, they could have more than half of the flags.

“So…” Huang Xiong looked at He Yan inquiringly.

 “Go down the mountain.”

“Go down the mountain now?” Jiang Jiao hesitated.

“It’s too early to get down the mountain now, and we can seize the opportunity. Hiding on the only way down the mountain, no matter the recruits who have flags or not, they will always pass by our eyes. The team that seems to have the most would become our sheep/target.”

“What you say sounds very easy,” Wang Ba couldn’t help arguing. “The other party would definitely not be a sheep. Since they can get so many flags, they must be ruthless ones. We may not be able to win.”

“What you said is very reasonable.” He Yan nodded, “So the game under the mountain will definitely not be easy. But it doesn’t matter, we will definitely win.”

“How?”

The young man smiled enthusiastically, “Because of me/Because there is me.”

# Chapter 82: **Lei Hou**

The group headed down the mountain.

This young man seemed to never know what humility is. He was confident but not arrogant and he always seemed to have a plan in mind.  He also has the ability to convince the crowd, at least until now, he had done what he said.

The six flags were all held in Jiang Jiao’s arms. After walking for a while, he was already far from the top of the mountain. Just when they were about to reach the mountainside, He Yan stopped and said, “Now, let’s take a rest here.”

Everyone sat down, but He Yan climbed the tree instead and took a look around. Wang Ba asked, “What are you doing?”

“Stepping on board.” He Yan replied. [t/n She’s saying like I’m waiting for a good opportunity] [ed/n: this is the same bandit slang that appeared in one of the earlier chapters. It’s implying that the main character is scouting around and waiting for a chance.]

“You’re now so familiar with the robbery, what kind of board are you still stepping on.” Wang Ba snorted, “You’re pretending  on purpose.”

He Yan watched the surroundings for a while before she climbed down the tree, and sat down on the stone, saying, “This should be the last stop. Since we are following a tricky plan, we must succeed in one shot. Otherwise, with just six flags, we may not come in at the first position.”

“They will really pass through here?” Jiang Jiao turned and glanced behind him. The dense forest was deep, with no one in sight. “There are so many mountain roads and the mountain is so big. What if they take the other mountain roads?”

“There are many small and long routes on Baiyue mountain,” He Yan smiled, “People with flags would always be more cautious. If they take the wide route, they will inevitably attract attention.  For the fear of other recruits coming to snatch their flags, they will definitely not take any wide routes. Amongst the small roads, this is the shortest way to the guardhouse, and is also the easiest route to find. You must know that not everyone can remember the path they went through, so they are most likely to take this route.”

Huang Xiong liked to listen to He Yan’s speech, so he asked, “Is what you said written in the art of war?”

“This is called the Theory of Circumstance,” He Yan picked up a branch and drew a picture on the ground to show them, “The purpose is not to choose the place to deal with the enemy, but instead to control the complexity with simplicity, to adapt to the constant changes, to respond to big changes with the small ones, to respond the movement with no movement, and to respond to big actions with small ones.”

Wang Ba asked, “Then, are we not doing anything? Didn’t you say that our tactics have long been exposed to others and that they won’t be fooled.”

“You’re thinking that since the other party has won a lot of flags, they must have also won many games and their morale must have risen greatly. So if they really face us, they may not lose.” Having said that, He Yan still didn’t have any anxiety on her face, “So let’s go ahead. Go down the mountain and recharge our energy. By the way, let’s also find a good place to lie in ambush, but I think that in the end, it may still be the more powerful group between both to  be the one capturing  the flags.”

“But this is also natural. Ultimately, in capturing the flag , between the best people, there will always be a winner.”

None of them can answer these words, only Wang Ba squinted at her and said coldly, “Why are you the best person?”

“Have I ever named myself?” He Yan replied sincerely.

Wang Ba: “…”

“In short, everyone let’s first eat, drink and rest here., After that, we will lie in ambush as just arranged. I have looked around, the road ahead is dangerous and narrow, It’ll be easy to defend and difficult to attack, which is good for us. We can take advantage of the situation. After I’ve grabbed the flag, don’t indulge in the fight but follow me to leave quickly. Going down the mountain is the priority, and once we leave the Baiyue Mountain, no one can grab the flag from us.”

“Understood!” Huang Xiong gulped down almost half of the pot water, “I can’t wait!”

“Give me the flags.” He Yan said.

Jiang Jiao handed the flags to her and He Yan tucked them in her body, saying, “I think the last group passing through here will also have the flag in the hands of their leader. I’m bound to fight with him. You just have to entangle the other teammates and prevent them from getting close.”

“Can you really do it alone?” Wang Ba asked, “There are six flags. They might get scattered or snatched away.”

“You’re really underestimating your leader.” He Yan leaped slightly, landing on the branch, and laughed, “At least in Liangzhou Wei, no one can snatch my things away from me.”

…

Wang Xiaohan was leading his team down the mountain.

His clothes were torn till they were barely covering his upper body.  Fortunately, his trousers were still intact. The blade in his hand had been chipped and his eyes were also darked from the  punch he took in the face. The companions behind him were no better. All of them had blue noses, swollen faces, and ragged clothes. If one didn’t know about the competition, they might mistake them as refugees from outside the city.

Wang Xiaohan felt very despair.

Being the recruits of Liangzhou Wei, they had to fight for the flag. In the beginning, they were all very proud and full of enthusiasm. But who knew that once they actually went up to the mountain, it was not as easy as they thought it would be.

In the rugged mountain roads, one must find the flags hidden within the mess. They had to watch out for snakes, insects, beasts, and even the traps set by the hunters. In competing with other recruits, if you encountered the milder ones, it was still quite okay, but if you encountered the brutal ones, you would be immediately beaten up to a pulp.

Although the instructor said that it would not be life-threatening before they went up the mountain, it was still impossible to remain scratchless during a fight. Though their lives were not endangered,  Wang Xianhan was still beaten up to a pulp. Wang Xiaohan thought aggrievedly. From the time he grew up, this was the first he was beaten up to this extent. How miserable!

Moreover, their flags were all robbed away. With nothing left, Wang Xiaohan also came to realize that their team was inferior to the others. It was good that they were able to descend safely. Whoever that loves to enter the forward camp, can go to the damn forward camp and fight for the damn flag!

As he was thinking, he stepped on the dead branches. Suddenly something hit his forehead. It didn’t hurt, but he was shocked. When he looked up, he saw the oak tree in front of him. A boy in red was sitting on the tree, holding a handful of acorns in his hand, and aiming at his forehead. Seeing Wang Xiaohan looking over, the boy smiled and greeted him, “Hey!”

The young boy’s eyebrows were beautiful and his expression was spirited,like a good portrait, but Wang Xiaohan felt like a basin of cold water poured from his head to his feet, and his heart felt cold. He trembled, and only had time to let out a miserable cry, “…It’s He Yan, run–“

When the companions heard the words, they ran away. Wang Xiaohan turned around and also wanted to run, but the moment he moved, he felt that something flew toward his knees. Then, his legs became numb and he could no longer move. Looking at his several companions, they were all in the same situation.

He Yan jumped down from the tree, still holding the acorn in her hand, as she had just hit their acupuncture point with the acorn. This was also due to the fact that Wang Xiaohan and his party were injured, and the road down the mountain was steep, in addition, they were exhausted from walking here, so they were easily restrained by He Yan.

He Yan walked to Wang Xiaohan but Wang Xiaohan didn’t wait for her to speak, and shouted, “We don’t have a flag, all of them were snatched!”

Wang Ba and others also walked out from hiding at this moment, searched them all, shook their heads to He Yan, and said, “Nothing.”

“Since there is no flag, why did you try to run away after seeing me?” He Yan asked curiously.

“…I was afraid you will hit me.” Wang Xiaohan said difficulty.

“Who told you that we beat people up?” He Yan became even more curious, and looked at his eyes as she again, “Brother, your injuries seem to be serious, is the flag fight on the mountain already so fierce?”

They avoided the particularly fierce disputes from the start to the end, so they didn’t know what the actual situation was. At this moment, looking at the miserable appearance of Wang Xiaohan and his party, they were all fortunate that they did not fight head-on with the other recruits.

No one would like to be beaten into a pulp.

“We, we heard that you’d robbed a lot of flags,” Wang Xiaohan hesitated, “And the methods were cunning and cruel…”

Wang Ba was unhappy, “What the hell is this nonsense? We are using cruel means? Who is corrupting our reputation everywhere?”

Wang Xiaohan didn’t dare to say that people outside were saying more than just that, and they were directly describing He Yan and the others as a mob, or a group of dogs and foxes.

“You just want to go down the mountain, right?” He Yan asked.

Wang Xiaohan nodded.

“Without a flag, why do you want to go down the mountain?”

Wang Xiaohan broke the jar and said, “I can’t get it anyway. It’s better to go back to take a bath and rest early.”

“Let me ask you again,” He Yan looked at him with a smile, “Apart from us, who holds the most flags on the mountain right now?”

“It’s…Lei Hou.”

“Lei Hou?” Huang Xiong frowned, “Have you ever heard of this name?”

Jiang Jiao shook his head, “No.”

Shi Tou and Wangba also said that they had never heard of it. Liangzhou Wei has tens of thousands of recruits, and all the outstanding people will surely be talked about after all. Since Lei Hou had grabbed the flag of many people, he should also be very talented. But before today, no one had heard the name of this person.

“Is he great?” He Yan asked Wang Xiaohan.

“Very powerful. He has more than a dozen flags in his hands. I think except for the ones in your hands, all the flags are with him.” Wang Xiaohan said.

More than a dozen, He Yan raised her eyebrows. It seemed that Lei Hou’s wins were not because of luck. She asked, “How did he grab the flag and set a trap?”

“No, no,” Wang Xiaohan replied, “Whenever he saw someone with a flag, he would directly fight with the opponent. After defeating the opponent, he would snatched the flags. His companions are similar to ours, but this person is really amazing, he can withstand several others by himself.”

He Yan was stunned. If that’s the case, this person was not ordinary. She asked, “Your injuries were inflicted by him?”

Wang Xiaohan nodded humiliatingly.

He Yan shook her head.

Wang Xiaohan asked, “What’s wrong?”

“He beat you, why didn’t you hit him?”

“I couldn’t fight!” Wang Xiaohan said angrily, “If I had the skills like yours, I would have beaten him up a long time ago!”

“That’s not true. If you can’t fight with your hands, you just need to use your brain.” He Yan patted him on the shoulder and unlocked the acupuncture points for them, “You told us so much, I’ll take you revenge for you. Brothers,” she turned to greet Jiang Jiao and the others, “Don’t stand still, pack up and work.”

“Are you really going to fight against him?” Wang Xiaohan asked cautiously. After having a few words with He Yan, he felt that He Yan was not as cruel as the rumors said. Wang Xiaohan was relieved and kindly persuaded him, “Since you already have flags in your hand, you should go down the mountain first. Lei Hou is great at fighting. If you can’t fight him, you eventually won’t have any flags left. If you go down the mountain now, you will still be able to get the second position.”

“Second?” He Yan shook her head, “The second one may not necessarily enter the forward battalion. Don’t worry,” He Yan said, “No matter how powerful he is, he can only be a worm once he enters my territory.”

She laughed wildly, and for a while, Wang Xiaohan had nothing to say.

…

After being briefly questioned by He Yan, Wang Xiaohan and the others made their way down the mountain. They were afraid that He Yan and Lei Hou would fight together and drag them along. They ran so fast that they disappeared in a few seconds without leaving any trace.

Jiang Jiao turned his head to look at He Yan, “After listening to what he said, Lei Hou seems to be very skilled.”

“Don’t worry,” He Yan said, “I’m even better.”

She was so confident that everyone didn’t know what else to say. He Yan estimated the time. It shouldn’t be long before Lei Hou and his group would go down the mountain, so she urged everyone to hide quickly, and not waste time.

After hiding and waiting long enough to   drink a cup of tea, someone’s footsteps approached.

There were a total of five people on the route, one in the front and the other four behind. The leader of these five people should be in front. He looked about 20 years old, a young man, tall and thin, handsome, with blazing eyes. He walked to the dense forest and stopped suddenly, restraining the movement of his companions behind him with one hand, and said, “Hold on!”

“Brother Lei?” the companion asked.

“Ahead in this dense forest, there is a faint murderous intent. I am afraid that there are ambushers here.”

“Ambush?” The companion felt very novel, “How can anyone dare to ambush us?”

Their group, relying on Lei Hou, grabbed all the flags from the hands of other recruits on the mountain. Others, not to mention an ambush, always took a detour whenever they saw their group. So their group had been openly going down the mountain, almost without cover, because no one can beat Lei Hou.

“We only have 14 flags in our hands.” Lei Hou said, “The remaining six are untouched.”

“Aren’t the rest in He Yan’s hands?”

“Not bad.” Lei Hou looked at the dense forest in front of him, “So most likely the person who set up an ambush here is He Yan.”

They looked at each other for a long while, and someone asked, “Then what should we do?”

There was no one in Liangzhou Wei who didn’t know about He Yan, as he was considered to be a one-in-a-million talent. Although Lei Hou was also very good, it would be hard to say what the outcome would be if the two of them played hand in hand.

“Good timing,” Lei Hou smiled suddenly, and said, “He is here, and happened to have the rest of the flags, we just have to snatch them all, leaving none for them.”

This remark was full of confidence, making people excited. The companions agreed one after another, and Lei Hou commanded again, “You all just need to deal with other people and leave He Yan to me.”

He didn’t know that, coincidentally, He Yan thought the same too.

Lei Hou took a few steps forward alone. The road was narrow and there were dense jungles on both sides. He did not step forward any further, but instead said loudly to the front, “I’m Lei Hou. Come out, He Yan. I know you are here. “

The young man’s chuckle suddenly sounded from the tree. Lei Hou raised his head and looked up. The young man leaned half of his body against the branch and supported his head with one hand, seemed to be taking a nap, his eyes filled with regret as he said, “Brother’s eyes are really too good. I can’t even hide for long.”

“You hid well.” Lei Hou also smiled, “It’s just that your companions’ murderous intent were too strong.”

He Yan thought helplessly, what can she do? A mountain bandit, a green forest warrior, a young master of a martial arts school, and a hunter who was born and raised in Shuojing. All of them had suffered through the blood and rain, how could they be as calm as a monk from the temple?

“Call your people out,” Lei Hou said, “Let’s fight for the flag upright.”

He bit the word [put a lot of emphasis on the word] “upright” very hard.

Probably when he was at the top of the mountain, he had already heard rumors about He Yan and the others’ “great achievements” and their love to fish in muddy waters [1], that’s why he had to emphasize not to use intrigue and trickery

“They like to play hide and seek,” He Yan only smiled: “Get your people find them by themselves.”

Lei Hou’s smile turned cold and he looked at He Yan for a moment. Suddenly, a cold light rushed towards He Yan. He Yan avoided and passed by the cold light, but saw that cold light flew back to Lei Hou’s hand, it was a long sword.

This person used a sword.

“Brother is really too anxious,” He Yan smiled slightly, raised her hand, and pulled out the nine-section whip around her waist. The whip collided in the air with a crisp sound. The boy jumped off the branch, “So, I’ll fight you!”

She rushed towards Lei Hou.

Lei Hou also greeted her. Lei Hou’s companions behind him wanted to help, but as soon as they tried to move, they saw a few people drilled out from all directions, from the grass, behind the stone, and also from beside the tree trunk. They were probably He Yan’s companions. They were caught off guard as their opponents grasped the first opportunity. As such, Lei Hou’s people, who were caught off guard, had to suffer such a stifling loss.

They were beaten up a few times.

Since going up the mountain, they have been invincible throughout. So when they were beaten up, they were more shocked than angry.

Wang Ba waved his axe and rushed into the crowd, “Your grandfather, I, wanted to come out and do this a long time ago. Come on, let’s have a good fight!”

He Yan smiled and said, “Take it easy, Brother Wang, if it ends too soon, there will be no fun in fighting.”

“You still have the mood to joke?” Lei Hou felt unbelievable. He was probably angry at He Yan’s lack of concentration during the fight. He wasn’t being soft since the time he started, as his sword’s blade stabbed straight towards He Yan’s chest.

He Yan frowned slightly, looking at Lei Hou’s expression gradually becoming cold.

The purpose of recruits going up the mountain is to fight for the flag and not to have a real fight. Therefore, the instructor had also reminded the recruit in every possible way, not to hurt lives. But when she fought against Lei Hou just now, she already knew that this person really had no scruples.

It was no wonder that Wang Xiaohan was beaten so badly and was discouraged so early. She thought Wang Xiaohan might not be the most miserable one of the ones who fought with Lei Hou. For example, if it wasn’t her just now, she was afraid that the person would have already been stabbed.

He was really not going soft at all.

Seeing He Yan’s expression changed, a trace of contempt flashed in Lei Hou’s eyes, and he said, “If you give up at this moment, I won’t fight.”

“Why?” The young man smiled and said, “I still want the flags in your arms.”

Lei Hou’s face changed. All the flags were indeed in his arms. First, it was because he had snatched these flags, and the others had no objection to putting them with him. The second reason was that no one dared to snatch it from him.

Unexpectedly, He Yan could see through at a glance.

He sneered, his eyes were quick, as he pointed his sword at He Yan, and was about to lift He Yan’s front lapel to grab He Yan’s flags. He Yan raised her hand and the nine-section whip’s tail snapped off Lei Hou’s sword tip as she took a few steps back with her toes tapping.

She lowered her head and glanced at her clothes. Fortunately, they were intact. A trace of dissatisfaction passed in her heart. If this was Shuojing, Lei Hou’s actions would have been enough for the girl to send him through the gates of the official office. Molesting a virtuous woman in the streets was what a gangster does.

“This is very rude of you, Brother Lei.” She raised her eyebrows, “I’m a little angry.”

[1] This is a Chinese idiom used to describe people taking advantage of the chaos situation in front of their eyes.

# Chapter 83: **The Formation**

“I’m a little angry.”

As soon as this sentence came out, Wang Ba and the others all coincidentally looked at He Yan at the same time.

Shi and He Yan had stayed together for the longest time as compared to the others in the group. He knew that He Yan always had a good-temper. Even when Wang Ba came to snatch her meat buns previously, she only protected the food by herself and did not say that she was angry so seriously.

Right now, this monkey, who no one knew where he came from, actually made He Yan angry.

Lei Hou laughed, “Brother He, the sword has no eyes, don’t be angry.”

“That is only if you can hurt me.” He Yan smiled, flipped her body backward, and quickly arrived behind Lei Hou. Her nine-section whip was like a long snake, swinging lightly, Lei Hou avoided it. However, the whip was long and could not be avoided by a glance, he was thrown off by the whip, as it brushed his cheek. In a flash, a red mark appeared on Lei Hou’s face.

Because he was scratched by the tail of the whip, there was no bleeding, even so, Lei Hou’s face became unsightly.

“Brother Lei, the whip has no eyes,” He Yan hooked her finger at him, “Don’t be angry.”

Lei Hou, without uttering a word, lunged towards her with his long sword in hand. He moved skillfully as his murderous aura soared, completely different from the new recruits trained in the martial arts arena. Each slash was targeted at either He Yan’s throat or He Yan’s heart, which was very vicious.

In contrast, the teenager’s movements were much gentler. He was born thin and fragile, but he was not fatigued at all, as if he had infinite energy. Sweeping and wrapping his whip around, making Lei Hou’s sword impossible to move forward.

He Yan didn’t want to hurt Lei Hou, but Lei Hou thought differently. She pondered about it a few times in her heart, and it seemed that unless Lei Hou was completely knocked down, or left with only a single breath, he would not give up chasing after her and snatching the flags.

However, the fight against Leihou also gave He Yan a strange feeling. This strange feeling was unclear, but after all, it made her feel as if something had been ignored and she was feeling uncomfortable.

Just as she was thinking, a sword light came diagonally. He Yan was startled, and leaned back a little. The sleeve of her hand was cut in an instant, and the wind leaked in.

Lei Hou stared at her, his gaze shining as he said, “At this point, I don’t think you should have the time to be distracted!”

“I was just wondering, how I can calm you down,” He Yan said, “Brother Lei, has no one told you that you are a bit annoying?”

Such blatantly provocative words, coupled with her smiling expression, can really blow up ordinary people. Lei Hou’s face sank immediately as he raised his sword to stab her. He Yan smiled slightly, throwing out the long whip, like a long snake it rolled around, preventing the tip of the sword from slashing and moving an inch more.

She was still smiling, as she continued, “Actually, you don’t know, the whip I use is a very amazing weapon.”

In an instant, the whip flew around in the air, sweeping and rolling forward, sometimes fast, sometimes slow, making people dazzled.

The young man’s voice with a hearty smile, as if it was not a fierce fight for the flag, but a friendly battle with the companions in the martial arts arena, and she spoke as the whip fluttered in the air with her beautiful footwork.

“This is called inside and outside, pivoting.”

“This is called double-crossing an equine.”

“This, White Snake breathing poison.”

 “and this, Sweeping Dragon!”

She moved faster and faster, as Wang Ba and the others had long stopped their movements, looking at her, surprised by her aura.

In the martial arts arena, they already knew she was very powerful. But now it seemed that she had been being generous and collected.

Lei Hou gritted his teeth as his complexion became uglier.

He didn’t put He Yan in his eyes, no matter how powerful a recruit was, the recruit wouldn’t know everything. The fact that He Yan was excellent with the sword, bow, and spearman ship did not mean that he could defeat him. But right now, this young man, who came here with a whip, was using it with ease, as if he had already used it thousands of times. Not only was he using it with ease, he was also making use of it very well. It couldn’t be said who was winning the battle.

But He Yan was really too cunning. He had only fought with him a few times, but it seemed that He Yan could observe his weaknesses and attack them exclusively, in such a short period of time. Whereas he was not able to find He Yan’s weakness at all. So he couldn’t even start to try anything, causing Lei Hou to feel alarmed.

The young man’s smile expanded with every slash of whips. Lei Hou felt that the long whip in front of him was like a spinning wheel, and also like a hard and fierce steel rod, sometimes like a worm sometimes like a dragon, infinitely changing. He couldn’t help but feel a little dazzled.

Just when he was dazzled, he noticed the long whip coming towards him again, Lei Hou subconsciously took the sword to block it. The next moment, the whip bent mischievously and leaned straight toward his chest.

Lei Hou secretly said in his heart that it was not good, but it was too late. The whip seemed to have eyes, as the full dozen flags that were directly caught in his arms were snatched.

Lei Hou wanted to block the long whip with his sword, but the long whip could be retracted or put away, as it avoided being entangled by his sword. The whip slipped back and flags fell into He Yan’s hands.

“This is called golden silk-wrapped gourd.” He Yan grabbed the flags in her hand and smiled, “Thank you, Brother Lei, you even tied them up for me.”

Lei Hou was conceited and felt that none of the recruits on Baiyue Mountain who were fighting for the flag today could beat him. Therefore, even the place where flags were placed was open, they were directly bundled with a rope and were placed in his arms. But at this moment, He Yan took everything away. He couldn’t help but to feel regret. It would have been much safer if they were divided amongst his teammates, and all of them would not have been snatched away at once.

Seeing that they were all taken away by He Yan, Lei Hou couldn’t hold back his gloomy expression anymore. Without a word, he rushed towards He Yan.

He Yan took a few steps back and said with a smile, “When something comes to my hands, it becomes my property, and no one can grab my things.”

“What if I want to grab it?” Lei Hou was murderous, his sword slashed like a shooting star.

“Actually, I don’t like fighting,” He Yan sighed, “If you want to grab them, then I have to beat you up.”

The two figures collided in an instant.

Wang Ba and Lei Hou’s companions were already tired from fighting. Besides, the flag was not in their hands, and it is meaningless to fight. They were already sitting under the tree, watching like a spectator. They were also very clear in their heart, this was a contest between He Yan and Lei Hou, whoever wins can take away the flags.

“Can you tell which of them is better?” Lei Hou’s companion asked.

Jiang Jiao shook his head, “I can’t tell.”

 “There’s no need to ask, it must be He Yan!” Wang Ba answered naturally.

“Oh? What makes my brother say this?”

“I don’t know, just felt it.”

“…”

“…Want some pine nuts?” Huang Xiong also handed a pine nut to the other party.

“Thanks a lot, well, it’s so fragrant!”

They hadn’t even finished eating a small handful of pine nuts when suddenly they heard a “dong” sound.

Everyone looked forward together, and the two figures had already separated. Lei Hou’s face was still, whereas the young man was smiling, holding a long whip.

A sword was lying on the ground.

“You’ve lost.” He Yan said.

Lei Hou’s face was ugly, and he didn’t speak. After a while, he said solemnly, “You cheated.”

“Soldiers are not tired of the deceit.” He Yan picked up the long sword on the ground and returned it to him, as she earnestly said, “Your leg was injured by me, rest here for half an hour before moving, otherwise your leg will be left with sequelae. In the future, you won’t be able to make any further gains in practice.”

Lei Hou put aside his face and took the sword, not wanting to look at her.

“It’s okay,” He Yan patted him on the shoulder, and said earnestly, “The victory and defeat are affairs that cannot be predicted, and the one who can endure shame is a real man. It’s just a flag fight. You are already very good, but it’s a pity that you met me.”

She pointed to herself, “I am the best.”

Wang Ba and others have heard He Yan say this countless times, and they didn’t bother at first, and so now they were numb. Besides, what she said was true.

He Yan greeted Jiang Jiao, “Let’s go.” and also said to Lei Hou’s companions, “You can rest here, and protect Brother Lei by the way.”

The man looked at her in disbelief.

“You have beaten up so many recruits on the mountain. After a while, the recruits would be going down the mountain. Seeing that Brother Lei is unable to move, it would be inevitable that they’ll join hands to beat him back.”

“That’s why I advised,” she said righteously, “Don’t do evil for trival things.”

…

Lei Hou and his team were left behind, while Jiang Jiao and the others followed He Yan down the mountain.

“He just said that you made a swindle,” Huang Xiong couldn’t help asking, “How did you make a swindle?”

“In fact, it’s not a swindle, but it’s deliberately selling him a few flaws.” He Yan shrugged, “He wanted my life, and I only wanted him to not be able to escape or catch up to me. He misunderstood my meaning, so…”

“That monkey is not very powerful,” Wang Ba said nonchalantly. “If he was really powerful, how could he be defeated so soon! So weak!”

“You are wrong,” He Yan shook her head and laughed. “He is really great. Among the recruits of Liangzhou Wei, if it wasn’t for me, he would be the first one.”

He Yan had fought against him. She didn’t know what this person did in the past. He was only in his twenties and must have practiced martial arts for at least ten years. His knowledge was deep and the techniques were skillful. If there was anything wrong about him, it was just that he was too murderous. Although he didn’t hurt his life, he could seriously injure his comrades with his fighting style.

It was precisely because of his skills that his method of capturing the flag was so simple and rude. It was just the matter of capturing the flag, never a matter of setting up a ring. Whoever that could fight to the end is the winner. Although Lei Hou was very powerful, he had been fighting against other recruits on the top of the mountain. The non-stop ups and downs on the mountain, after all, consumed a lot of his physical strength. It wouldn’t have mattered if the fight happened near the start of the competition, but as the time spent became longer, their flaws became more obvious.

As for He Yan, going up and down the mountain today, all five people acted together. Wang Ba and the others were also working hard. In addition to making arrangements, He Yan didn’t really meet other teams as much. So she was energetic and had the strength to see through Lei Hou’s weakness.

“Is he really not going to follow?” Jiang Jiao was still a little skeptical, and looked back frequently, “I think we should go faster, in case he catches up.”

“Don’t worry,” He Yan said, “Unless he doesn’t want to continue martial arts training, he won’t follow. But what you said makes sense. We’d better hurry down the mountain.”

…

In the guardhouse, a game of chess had yet been played.

Shen Han’s heart was filled with things, and he had no intention of playing chess at all. The young man on the opposite side seemed to be in no rush, nor cared about the result of the flag fight, idly drinking tea, playing the game, being calm and heinous.

A black-clothed guard came in from the door, walked to Xiao Jue’s side, and whispered, “He Yan bumped into Lei Hou and fought against Lei hou. Lei hou was defeated. Right now, all twenty flags belong to He Yan.”

He didn’t avoid Shen Han, so when Shen Han heard these words, he immediately sucked in a breath of cold air.

Lei Hou was noticed by them when he started fighting for the first flag when he went up the mountain. This young man didn’t show his talents before. If it hadn’t been for this flag fight, he wouldn’t know that Liangzhou Wei had such a capable fighter. This person was also recommended by relatives in the family of the headteacher Du Maodu. He didn’t seem special at first, but now he knew that he had real skills.

This man went up the mountain to fight for the flag and fought against others, yet he wasn’t defeated once. His method was also different from He Yan’s ambush, he didn’t hide in the dark, he only knew how to go up straight and not how to cover up. Fortunately, he was extremely skilled, defeating countless people and taking 14 flags at once, twice as many as He Yan.

Shen Han was still looking forward to the meeting between Lei Hou and He Yan. He really wanted to see who would win the match between the two. Shen Han thought that He Yan was used to making tricks, so he might not be able to beat Lei Hou if he did it directly. After all, Lei Hou was really good at it.

He had never thought that Lei Hou would still be defeated by He Yan.

“He Yan and his team have already started walking down the mountain,” Fei Nu continued, “After another half an hour, they would enter the formation.”

Shen Han looked at Xiao Jue.

At first, he thought that for a recruit, there was probably no need to use formations. But now there was only one thought in Shen Han’s heart, this young man is omnipotent, he can do anything. He was afraid that this formation would not be able to trap him.

Xiao Jue looked calm, lowered his eyes, and picked Shen Han’s white pieces away.

Shen Han asked in a low voice, “General… he will win, right?”

Xiao Jue curled the corners of his lips, “Perhaps.”

…

The sun was gradually sinking to the west.

The sunlight changed from the brilliant gold in the day to the warm red, coming through the cracks in the branches and leaves, like a large red cloud, soft and bright, like a red veil worn by a girl.

The cry of wild birds came from the depths of the jungle. Probably because the twenty flags were already in hand, and the victory was in hand, the group was in a good mood. As if they were not up in the mountain to fight for the flag, but instead were returning home after having fun.

Wang Ba said, “I wonder if there will be a reward for going back, apart from the possibility in entering the forward camp?”

“There should be.” He Yan asked casually, “What do you want?”

“Wine! Of course, there should be good wine! I haven’t drank much since I came here.” Wang Ba complained, “If I could drink, I would have more energy than now!”

“That’s wine, not medicated food.” He Yan was a little amused.

“Can they reward me some good weapons?” Jiang Jiao said, “When I joined the army, I never brought along any weapons from home. The long spears in the martial arts arena are not easy to use. If I could get a good long spear in reward, it would be nice.”

Huang Xiong touched the Buddha beads on his neck and said, “I just want to eat hot beef. Drinking a big bowl of wine and eating big pieces of meat, that’s the way to live a life!”

Shi pondered for a long time before he said, “Take wheat to the mountain. He has always wanted to hunt rabbits.”

Among the four, the wishes of three were all related to eating and drinking, and He Yan didn’t know whether to praise them for their lack of desire. Jiang Jiao asked, “What about you? What reward do you want?”

“Me? There’s nothing I want.” He Yan said, “If I could enter the forward camp, I’d be very happy.”

“You really want to make contributions.” Wang Ba said sourly.

“That’s natural. I’m so powerful. Wouldn’t it be a shame if I didn’t make meritorious deeds? I still hope that I could be appreciated by the general and be a guard under him.” He Yan thought that if it was so, she and Xiao Jue would face each other every day. She could also enquire the news of the He family.

“You can just think about it,” Wang Ba rolled his eyes. “If you become one, I will call you father.”

He Yan, “…”

As he was talking, Huang Xiong stopped and said, “Are we going around the same place all the time? Why do I think that we have been here?”

“Pull back,” Wang Ba opened his mouth, “Do you know the way?”

 “I also think we have just been here.” Jiang Jiao also said.

He Yan didn’t speak, and the Shi took out a straw rope from his arms, walked to a tree in front of him, stretched out his hand to tie it up, and said, “The mountain roads are complicated, and the trees look similar, misunderstanding them are common. Let’s just walk around and see. “

The group started walking down again, and after the time of a cup of tea, they saw a tree in front of them, and the tree was tied with a straw rope that shi tied just before.

This time, everyone was quiet.

For a moment, Wang Ba spoke, as his voice was trembling with a hint of imperceptible tremor, he said, “Are we caught by some ghost?”

He continued to talk more and more vigorously, and babbled, “I heard a master at the top of our mountain saying that he used to walk the mountain road at night, and once he walked to a place, he was walking in circles at the same place. There was really no way out, so he just sat down and slept at the same place. By the next morning, can you, can you guess what happened?”

He deliberately stopped, but no one answered his words, Wang Ba said angrily, “He woke up and found himself in a graveyard!”

He Yan held her forehead, “Brother Wang, this doesn’t seem to be the time to tell ghost stories.”

“What are you afraid of?” Huang Xiong’s said in a jarring voice, “I have Buddha beads. Demons and monsters can’t get close. On the contrary you,” he turned to look at He Yan, “Did you remember the route wrong?”

“No.” He Yan said.

“Why did we suddenly get lost?” Jiang Jiao was also puzzled. Although Baiyue Mountain was big, it was not too big to get lost. When they came up, it was all going well, and when it’s time to head down, they couldn’t get out.

“We are indeed walking down the mountain,” He Yan said, “But we’re also walking in circles.” A thought flashed in her mind, and she walked to the tree tied with the straw rope and looked around.

This is a wild land, the trees are not as dense as the top of the mountain; the ground was overgrown with weeds, and a few scattered stones were falling everywhere.

Stones?

He Yan’s heart moved, and she walked a few steps forward and saw a pile of rocks. She bent down and looked at it carefully. Several boulders were piled up in a random manner, without any shape. They looked like they were picked up by hunters on the mountain to rest.

“Why are you staring at this pile of rocks?” Wang Ba asked, “Are there any words on it?”

He Yan straightened up and said, “There are no words on it, but they are the reason why we can’t get out.”

“What?” Jiang Jiao and others also came around, all looking at the stones, and they couldn’t see any pattern. Shi frowned and asked, “What do you mean?”

“Daoist magic, birth injury, recreation, dew, landscape, death, surprise, opening the eight doors. Someone has set up a formation here,” He Yan said, “We’ve entered the formation and that’s why we have been spinning around in circles.”

They only understood her words because she said them separately, but it would have been difficult for people to understand if her words were said altogether. Everyone looked at her, and they didn’t even know where to start asking questions.

He Yan also felt very strange. They hadn’t seen Wang Xiaohan and other’s shadows around, indicating that Wang Xiaohan and the others had already gone down the mountain. As it was impossible for Wang Xiaohan and his team to break the formation, this indicated that the formation was not here before. So why was their group trapped here now?

Who laid the formation specifically for her? Shen Han? Or was it Xiao Jue?

# Chapter 84: **Breaking the Formation**

After a long while, Wang Ba finally spoke. “The formation you are talking about…what is it?”

“Marching array, the generals always learn this to use this array. This formation was reformed from Daoist magic.” He Yan said, “It’s a long story, but this formation right now…”

“What?” Shi asked.

“It’s not a military formation. It’s just an ordinary octogram formation.” He Yan replied.

She really couldn’t understand why there suddenly was a Dao formation. There was no such a thing when she went up the mountain and Wang Xiaohan and the rest didn’t encounter it too. It seemed that it was prepared solely for them, or was it only for her? But why?

“Then can… we get out?” Jiang Jiao asked, staring at her face.

“Of course.”

 This time, Huang Xiong was also surprised, “You even know how to solve this?”

 He Yan smiled slightly, “I only know a little.”

Her “a little” was generally “everything”. Everyone had nothing to say. He Yan knew that there must be supervisors hiding in the dark on the mountain to observe their situation, and her words and actions were watched by the eyes hidden in the dark at this moment. It was impossible for her to say “no”.

Maybe Xiao Jue intentionally set up a formation specially for herself to test her ability? After all, she has never seen any Fight for the Flag that ends with having the team break a formation. It seemed that it was indeed not easy to enter the Nine Banner Battalion. If everyone in the Nine Banner battalion can break the formation, then the Nine Banner Battalion is really not simple. Xiao Jue had such cavalry, no wonder he was invincible in battle.

With that in mind, she said, “You all follow me, just copy what I’m going to do. Don’t make a wrong step.”

It was rare for He Yan to be so serious. Jiang Jiao and the others did not dare to be careless right now so they followed He Yan’s footsteps and slowly walked down the mountain.

Huang Xiong said as he walked, “Brother He, who did you learn this trick from?”

He Yan smiled and said, “I learned from an expert.”

“I think so too,” Huang Xiong nodded, “Your master must be a peerless master. Or else how could you know everything?”

He Yan lowered her head and smiled without answering. In fact, it was not uncommon for General Feihong to be brave and skilled in the battlefield. The world does not lack heroes who are not afraid of death. Although she was good at her skills, it was not to the point where she could be considered as number one in the world. Let alone fighting against the group of heroes alone. General Feihong was best in the formation of troops.

Her master was indeed peerless, but as a woman, she was not as good as a man as she lacked physical strength and physique. People must know how to use their strengths and avoid weaknesses. If they learn to arrange and deploy troops, they will be more capable than fighting on the battlefield alone. Her master was best at Daoist magic, so she learned to combine it with the art of war, and finally became this generation’s famous General Feihong.

Generals needed to learn how to train and deploy troops, but why did the Nine Banners Battalion learn this too? He Yan was puzzled and couldn’t find the clue, so she gave up and headed down the mountain. Actually, she could have also directly broken the formation by destroying it directly. But He Yan was not sure if this formation was prepared for her. In case it was prepared for others, and she ended up destroying it so passionately, what would be left for the others?

That was why she took Jiang Jiao and the others out through the door of life.

This formation was just as easy for her, since she was familiar with it. But when it fell into the eyes of the supervisor who was observing secretly, it became a remarkable event.

Ma Damei and Liang Ping were hiding in the dark at the moment. Seeing He Yan and her group going away, the two opened their mouths and looked at each other, both could see surprise in each other’s eyes.

“He… he just left?” Liang Ping stammered.

“As if there was nothing…” Ma Damei said.

He Yan didn’t even stop to think, nor did he think about how to break the formation. With just a glance at it and he knew how to get out. Such a character unexpectedly appeared among their new recruits. So far it seemed that nothing could stop him.

This should have been a good thing, a heroic young man, so extraordinary, whoever that has such a hero under them, would feel that it must be because of their luck that had been accumulated for several lifetimes. However, the situation now was complicated, and from the look of head Instructor Shen they saw last time, they don’t know whether it was a blessing or a curse.

The jungle was dense, half of the sun had already sunk down the mountain. He Yan and his group have also stepped out of the formation. She stopped and looked back. The formations made of stones and dead branches seemed blurred and indistinguishable.

“We’ve walked out?” Wang Ba asked.

“Correct.”

Wang Ba was happy, “The hell! There is nothing that can stop us this time, right? I guess it will take another half an hour’s walk to head down the mountain completely.”

Jiang Jiao was also a little pleased, “It’s almost over.” He saw He Yan still looking behind and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He Yan shook her head. She still felt that this formation was inexplicable. When Lei Hou fought her before, there was something strange. These discomforts are like tiny stones falling into the boots, and the panic of it is making it difficult for her to feel joy. She only felt that she had overlooked something and was feeling uneasy.

“It’s getting dark, let’s go down the mountain early.” Huang Xiong said.

He Yan retracted her thoughts and said, “Let’s go.”

 …

The sun hasn’t sunk yet at the Baiyue Mountain, as it fell into Wulu River, half of its body underneath the river, the water surface dipped by the setting sun was splendid like the color of blood, glowing with sparkling waves, as if a woman’s makeup box had been opened, making the whole place sprinkled with pearls and jade.

A pot of tea in the room has long been cold.

It was the time of the evening when the wind was light and the autumn colors spread all over. There were two people sitting playing a game, one anxious, and the other calm.

Someone walked in from outside and said, “The first team has gone down the mountain.”

Shen Han looked at Feinu, waiting for Feinu to say the person’s name.

“It’s He Yan.”

Listening to these three words, Shen Han leaned back slightly, and his whole body relaxed.

This result, unexpectedly, was reasonable. He had already guessed this result, though with some doubts, and now he has finally confirmed it. He was a little bewildered for a while.

Settling down the black chess piece, the young man in front of him raised his head and said indifferently, “You have lost.”

Shen Han, “…The general’s chess skills are superb, I am ashamed.” In the past half-day, he hadn’t won once.

Rather, he didn’t know how Xiao Jue was in the mood to play chess like this.

“General, they have come down the mountain, do you want to reward them now…”

“No need,” Xiao Jue curled his lips, “Du Mao can handle it. It’s the Mid-Autumn Festival five days later. The Mid-Autumn Festival night tour can be regarded as the reward.”

“The matter of the Forward Battalion, is it possible to let He Yan in?” Shen Han asked hesitantly. He Yan has already won first place, so naturally, he should enter the Forward Battalion. But his identity is doubtful, so it was unclear if he’s a friend or a foe. Wasn’t it a bit bad to agree rashly?

“No,” the young man stood up and looked at the laurel tree outside the window. The laurel tree was in bloom and fragrant, with it in one place, set off by a gentleman like jade in a beautiful atmosphere, he said, “Let Lei Hou enter the Forward Battalion. “

…

After going through the battle, it took only half an hour to get down from the mountain and arrive at the guardhouse.

There were a few torches flailing outside the martial arts arena. Everything was as calm as before — there was no instructor at the door and the scene of the warm celebration that they thought in their hearts could not be seen. The few people looked at each other.

“I thought there was a celebration,” Wang Ba was a little dissatisfied, “Why is there nothing?”

As they were talking, someone in the martial arts venue saw them and walked over to them. They didn’t see clearly until they got to the front. This person was Du Mao.

Du Mao was not as excited as he was when he sent them in the morning, and his expression was very calm. When he saw them, he asked, “Where are the flags?”

He Yan took out the large number of flags from her arms, her arms were bulging with them, as she steeply handed it to him, making her a lot more comfortable.

Du Mao counted, “Twenty?”

“Yes.” Jiang Jiao was still a little excited and couldn’t help but said: “We should be first, right?”

“Yes, you’re first.” Du Mao nodded, put the flags away, and said to them, “Go back, take a bath, and rest up. Tomorrow morning, you can take an extra hour off before coming to the martial arts arena. You have all worked hard today.”

Seeing no intention to give reward, Wang Ba asked, “That’s it?”

Du Mao looked at him, “What else?”

Wang Ba couldn’t answer this and somehow felt a little aggrieved. Du Mao said, “I’m heading back to the Head Instructor first, don’t stay here, you all are sweating all over, go wash up and eat something.” After that, he turned around and left, ignoring them.

Really ruthless…

Looking at Du Mao’s back, several people only felt that the night breeze was a little bit cold. When Wang Ba saw Du Mao walking far away, he dared to point to his back and asked, “No, what does he mean? He just left us alone? He has to explain it! We worked so hard together for a whole day and it was all in vain!”

Huang Xiong and Jiang Jiao were also a little disappointed, but Shi spoke up and said, “Perhaps they’re not going to discuss the merits today. After all, there are still some recruits who have not come down the mountain.”

“Yes.” He Yan thought so too, “We don’t know when the last recruit would come down the mountain, and besides, the instructors will discuss the reward for a while. It is not something that can be figured out immediately.”

Wang Ba glanced at her, and said sourly, “Of course you don’t care, your wish of entering the Forward Battalion will definitely be stable. So naturally, you can say that.”

“When I will enter the Forward Battalion, I will get you two jars of good wine.” He Yan patted his shoulder and said solemnly.

Wang Ba threw her hand away and hummed twice, “Whatever you say, Damn, I’m going back!”

They didn’t live in the same room, so they parted ways at the martial arts arena. When He Yan and Shi returned to the room, the originally quiet room suddenly became lively.

Mak rushed up first and leaped in front of Shi, “Brother! How’s it? How many flags did you get? What was your ranking?”

Shi showed a rare smile and said, “All.”

The people in the room were stunned for a moment, then suddenly cheered. He Yan was almost lifted up and thrown into the sky. She heard Hong Shan exaggeratedly yelling, “All? You guys are too desperate! Ahe, you really can do anything. This time you’re number one again. I don’t think it will be long before you will move out of this room. I heard that the soldiers in the Forward Battalion eat and sleep in better places than us. Hey, I’m so jealous!”

 “Shi, Brother He, tell us quickly, how did you capture all the flags?”

“That’s right, with so many recruits on the mountain, did you even need to fight? Was the fight good?”

“We took all the twenty flags, how could we not fight? I think you are all  thinking of it as something easy. Do you really think everyone else is incompetent?”

The room became too noisy. He Yan had to say, “Brothers, let us eat something and drink some water first, we will tell you slowly, no need to rush.”

After all the talk was over, it was already midnight.

Outside, they heard that the recruits were coming down the mountain one after another until all of them returned. He Yan breathed a sigh of relief. Once there was no one in the middle of the night, she could then to sneak to a place where no one was by the river to take a bath.

The long summer was finally over, and the river gradually began to show its coldness. He Yan couldn’t help but fight with the cold before entering completely. She was a little worried, but summer and autumn were still fine. However, in winter, it would not be easy for her to go to the bathroom with the recruits to take a shower and she does not know what the river water would be like. Cold comes second, but when the time comes, what excuse should she use to explain the fact that she doesn’t need hot water and would be going to a river for taking a cold bath?

Others will think she is sick in the head for sure!

Therefore, she has to enter the Nine banner battalion as soon as possible. Xiao Jue has no shortage of silver, and he is also a young master, so he won’t treat his confidant badly. It would always be a little more convenient than now.

Slowly adapting to the coldness, He Yan poured some water on her body and took the sachet given to her by Mak to wipe herself.

The recruits have all gone down the mountain and since she’s not heard any news of someone going missing, it meant that the formation on the way down the mountain should have been withdrawn after He Yan and the others left. The formation was really prepared for her, He Yan thought to herself, Xiao Jue really wanted her to enter the Nine Banners Battalion, and was deliberately testing her qualifications. In that case, after she passed, Xiao Jue should be satisfied with her and her entry to the Nine Banner Battalion should be assured. In the future, she only needed to show more of her skills, so that the Xiao Jue would become more satisfied with her, and the more chance she would have to become his confidant, preferable his right-hand man, the kind who are inseparable.

It was just that whenever she thought about Lei Hou, He Yan always felt that something was wrong with him during the fight against him. She couldn’t figure out what was wrong even after thinking for so long, and it was the same at this moment. She could only shake her head, hoping that she can find some reasons to spar with this person again in a few days, maybe she can figure out the crux of the matter.

But this person was really merciless and must be guarded against.

He Yan rinsed the foam, wiped her body with a cloth before putting on her clothes, and walking back to the house. Since the last time she bumped into Xiao Jue by the Wulu River, He Yan had to walk far every time she wanted to take a bath, in order to avoid bumping into him again. Come to think of it, she was really being very discreet as a new recruit too.

…

On the second day, all the recruits who had gone up the mountain the day before had a rest in their rooms. Cheng Li Su came to find He Yan.

Young Master Cheng brought two round pomegranates to He Yan, sitting cross-legged on her mat, and said, “I didn’t know that you were fighting for the flag until yesterday evening. My uncle locked me in the house for a whole day and I copied the books for the whole day. If I knew it, I would have come to see you.”

He approached He Yan, “I heard that Big Brother got 20 flags, this time you are the first among recruits in Liangzhou.”

He Yan smiled and opened the pomegranate brought by Cheng Lisu. The pomegranate was big and round, and the inside was already ripe. When it opened, the grains were like red crystals, making the tongue salivate. He Yan picked up a few grains to eat, and replied, “It’s just good luck. It’s just a fluke.”

“Big brother, you are good at everything, but you are too modest!” Cheng Lisu said sternly, “How can this be called good luck? You are already amazing!”

“Then I’m so good,” He Yan had the intention to get words out of his mouth, and looked at him with a smile as she asked, “Do you think I can enter the Nine Banner Battalion?”

“That’s…” Of course, these two words Cheng Lisu swallowed in his stomach forcibly.

Originally, this was a matter of course, it couldn’t be more natural, but Cheng Lisu still remembered that Xiao Jue’s attitude towards He Yan didn’t seem to be appreciative when he got words out of his mouth.

“I think, elder brother, you have proved one thing to everyone, that is you are the number one in Liangzhou Wei, and there is no doubt about it.” Cheng Lisu carefully weighed his words, “Any ordinary person would definitely choose you to enter the Nine Banners battalion.”

His words implied very clearly, “Ordinary person”, but Xiao Jue was not an ordinary person, so no one can say what the result will be.

He Yan didn’t notice the flaws in Cheng Lisu’s words, probably because she was overly confident in herself. After all, this time when she fought for the flag, she had already put all the flags in her bag, which was sufficient to show how good she was. Moreover, during the entire flag competition, He Yan recalled carefully and felt that she had performed very well. Not only could she arrange the troops, but also set up an ambush; not only could she take advantage of the tricks, but also not lose when fighting against Lei Hou. Even the formation that Xiao Jue added was easily broken, and He Yan felt that even in Xiao Jue’s current Nine Banners Battalion, she would be ranked among the best.

How could Xiao Jue let go of such an outstanding talent?

She was extremely happy and excited in her heart, so she didn’t notice, the happier she was, the more guilty Cheng Lisu appeared.

“However, do you know when the rewards based on merit will be given?” He Yan asked, “If there was none yesterday and if none today, it should be within the next few days. You are inseparable from your uncle, and you should know something.”

Cheng Lisu breathed a sigh of relief. He could answer this question, so he said, “Isn’t the Mid-Autumn Festival coming? On the night of August 15th, the barracks will be rewarded for their merits.”

He Yan was slightly startled, “Mid-Autumn Festival?”

“Yeah,” Cheng Lisu sighed, “Time flies so fast, I feel like it hasn’t been long since I came to Liangzhou, and it’s already Mid-Autumn Festival.”

He Yan looked at him and the face of this young boy, who had always been radiant and vigorous, was rarely worried. He Yan asked, “Do you want to go home?”

The worry quickly faded, making people wonder whether it had appeared just now. Cheng Lisu flicked his sleeve and said angrily, “How is it possible? Is the scenery in Liangzhou bad, or is my uncle ugly? Why should I be homesick? I’m so happy here! I don’t want to go back to get engaged!”

He Yan, “…”

Children at this age probably always yearn for freedom.

Cheng Lisu turned to her and asked, “Elder Brother, what about you? Do you want to go back?”

The young man lowered his eyes, and the shadow passing by made it difficult to see his expression clearly. Her voice contained happiness, with a slightly invisible sorrow, as she said, “Fortunately, I’m not too homesick.”

…

For the next few days, everything went on as per usual. The talk about the flag fight was only privately among the recruits, and everyone was talking about what kind of rewards the winners would get this time. The instructors were very calm and tight-lipped, not revealing anything, making people more agitated as if something was scratching their hearts.

The autumn moon became more complete day by day, and in a blink of an eye, the Mid-Autumn Festival will be arriving in just four days.

# Chapter 85: **A comparison of Miseries**

Autumn geese flew diagonally across the sky, the osmanthus trees were fragrant and the summer heat finally faded, leaving the coolness of dew in late autumn.

He Yan got up early in the morning. Mak handed her a pear, “I picked it in the woods next to the martial arts arena. It has been washed. Try it.”

He Yan freshened up. She took a bite and almost lost her tooth. Seeing her eyes narrowed from sourness, Mak scratched his head embarrassedly, “The ones in the wild forest have not fully ripe yet. It should sweeten after some days. Since it is now autumn, there are many wild fruits in the mountains and forests. We can secretly pick a few after practicing every day. This sour pear can also be marinated in sugar and eaten as candy. It’s really delicious!”

Seeing how this child only wanted to eat all day long, He Yan said, “There is no sugar here.”

Mak was stunned for a moment. After seeming to react, he was somewhat disappointed, “Ah right.”

“Not necessarily,” Hong Shan, who was watching them talk, interrupted. “Aren’t the rewards for your merits announced today? Ahe, you and Shi won the first prize in the competition, so there might be some sugar in the rewards given to you today. There might be other delicacies too, even sweetened snow pear could be there!”

Listening to this, Mak suddenly got excited and said, “Yes, Brother Ahe, Prizes are going to be announced today. Have you thought about what you want?”

“It’s not like I can get whatever I want,” He Yan smiled, “The guardhouse is not like the capital. The supplies are limited here.”

“Hey, he just wants to enter the Forward Battalion.” Hong Shan also took a bite of the pear, and said vaguely, “This request will definitely be met.”

He Yan smiled. Over the past few days, despite behaving calmly, she was a little excited. Once she enters the Nine Banners Battalion, she would be one step closer to Xiao Jue and also a step closer to proceeding He family’s matters more openly. She thought that she would be able to achieve her wish tonight. So far, her military journey has been quite smooth.

After all, everyone would want to have General Feihong for themselves. Thinking this, He Yan felt pleased in her heart.

The daytime was the same as usual, and they still went to the martial arts arena to train. But at night everyone gathered together and watched the moon in the open space near the foot of the mountain, outside the martial arts arena. In terms of moon viewing, Liangzhou was no better than the capital. Naturally, it was not like the old days where the wealthy would set up banquets, either in their yard or in the restaurant and boats, inviting colleagues and friends to enjoy delicious food. Appreciating the moon in Liangzhou was nothing more than lighting a bonfire, where recruits would sit in a group and eat something good that they usually do not eat. Perhaps they might also get some rice wine. The companions would brag and gossip with each other while drinking or eating meat together and looking at the moon.

After leaving the martial arts arena in the afternoon, He Yan went back to the room, carrying a change of clothes on her back. The recruits in Liangzhou Wei all have strong clothes for spring, summer, autumn, and winter. The clothes for spring and autumn can be worn throughout the year. There are two pieces, one is red and the other black. The style is simple and stain-resistant. He Yan changed into a red one and went to meet Cheng Lisu first.

Cheng Lisu had already been to the martial arts arena in the morning and asked He Yan to look for him in his house in the evening. He Yan guessed that Cheng Lisu was going to send her something to eat. Sure enough, upon seeing Cheng Lisu, the young boy handed her a mahogany basket.

The basket was exquisitely made, with the carvings of Goddess Chang’e flying to the moon on it. When she opened it, she saw mooncakes neatly arranged in it. The mooncakes were really fragrant and appeared delicious.

“Brother He, this is for you,” Cheng Lisu whispered, “Liangzhou Wei’s moon dumplings are too coarse. These were gifted from someone else. Take it.”

He Yan said, “Thank you.” She was actually not particularly interested in pastries. But if she were to give this basket of mooncakes Mak, that child would probably jump up happily.

“You’ve never eaten these before, right?” A hint of sympathy flashed in Cheng Lisu’s eyes, but there was also some smugness, “These are not the best. The cakes at Shuojing city’s Drunken Jade House are the world’s best. When we return to the city, I’ll invite you to eat there. Let me tell you a secret,” Cheng Lisu said as if offering treasures. “My uncle also likes the food at Drunken Jade House.”

He Yan thought that Cheng Lisu, like He Yunsheng, had the same unconditional and mindless admiration for Xiao Jue. As if the one who has got  Xiao Jue’s approval would not fall short of expectations.

But… well, to be honest, Xiao Jue is also not too bad.

After thanking Cheng Lisu for the autumn gift, the sky was getting dark. So He Yan carried the basket of snacks and went out. At this moment, a bonfire had been lit in the wild, at the foot of the mountain. The bonfire was bright, and many recruits had already arrived, sitting on the ground near the campfire. It seemed that each recruit had received a meatloaf and some oranges. The wooden branches were erected near the bonfire, with rabbits and fish skewered on them, which were hunted on Baiyue Mountain.

Looking at the scene, it seemed that there would be meat to eat today.

He Yan was in a very good mood as she tossed the basket in her hands back and forth. The aroma of roasted meat lingered nearby, making people hungry. She also saw a big wine jar near every bonfire. The wine wasn’t of good quality, and the smell was a bit pungent, but at this time, only strong wine was needed to fill the belly and relax.

She came a little bit late so she went to find Mak and others first. When passing by other recruits, they all looked at her with a strange expression.

Perhaps speculating on what rewards she would be receiving today.

He Yan walked forward happily. When she reached a place near the foot of the mountain, she saw Mak and the others. They were gathered around a bonfire. He Yan waved to them from a distance and greeted them, calling out, “Mak!”

Hearing the voice, the young man turned his head to look, but he didn’t respond enthusiastically to her as usual. Instead, he seemed hesitant. He Yan came closer and saw that, in addition to Hongshan and Shi, Jiang Jiao, Wang Ba and Huang Xiong were also there. Seeing these three people also gathered together, He Yan put down the snack basket from her hand, and sat down cross-legged, opening the basket lid, saying with a smile, “Look what good things I brought for you? No need to be thankful.”

She picked up an exquisite mooncake and handed it to Mak. The child was used to being greedy, she said, “Here!”

Mak froze for a moment, slowly reached out his hand to take it, and mumbled with his lips, seemingly wanting to say something but not uttering a word. He Yan said to the others, “Help yourself, you want to eat.”

No one answered her.

He Yan raised her head, everyone was staring at her, looking at her with strange eyes. Even the careless Hong Shan was silent. He Yan asked suspiciously, “What’s wrong? Why do you all look like you’ve seen a ghost? What happened?”

Hong Shan turned away, Jiang Jiao’s eyes flashed with sympathy, and he said, “He Yan, don’t be sad.”

“What would I be sad about?” He Yan was confused.

The atmosphere became suffocating again. He Yan looked at Huang Xiong. Huang Xiong looked away, rubbing the Buddha beads on his chest as if the world had nothing to do with him. But Wang Ba couldn’t help it, and said, “…Well, even if you didn’t get into the Forward Battalion, don’t be too sad. It all depends on the efforts.”

He Yan heaved a sigh of relief and said, “I thought it was something big. How could it be possible that I didn’t enter the Forward Battalion, I…” Her words stopped suddenly, and she looked at the crowd again. They couldn’t bear it, and she moved her lips. hearing her own voice, as if floating in the air, “Really didn’t enter?”

“When you were away, the head Instructor Shen came here, and announced that Lei Hou entered the Forward Battalion, there was no… no mention of you.” Mak carefully considered his words.

“Did you miss it?” He Yan still had a trace of hope in her heart, “perhaps because I wasn’t here.”

“I asked the Head Instructor for you,” Shi said softly, “We didn’t enter the forward battalion this time from the flag fight. Among the others, only Lei Hou got in.”

He Yan fell silent.

Everyone stared at him nervously. Everyone could see how much He Yan wanted to enter the Forward Battalion. When he first came to Liangzhou, he could barely even run with a heavy load. At that time, the boy forced himself to carry it down just to enter the Forward Battalion. He was so outstanding that he won first place in the fight for the flag. Not to mention that he didn’t understand it, even in the eyes of the people around him, they found it incomprehensible.

“It’s okay, there’s no need to be upset,” Hong Shan comforted her, “Isn’t it just a Forward Battalion? We can go to other battalions, like infantry battalions, and cavalry battalions? As long as you have the ability, why worry about no one appreciating? They don’t want you since they don’t have any vision!”

“Correct.” Jiang Jiao also felt sorry for her. It was far more convincing for someone like He Yan to be seen as an opponent than Lei Hou. “You are so powerful, and you will see the genuine gold in the strong fire. You will eventually be known in the future.”

Everyone was rushing to comfort her, but it was their first time seeing that the young man, who had always had his eyebrows and eyes opened wide, had his head lowered without saying anything. He was withering with frustrations written all over his body, as he gradually calmed down.

Hong Shan stabbed Mak’s arm and motioned for Mak to say a few words. Mak was trying to speak with all his brains but He Yan suddenly stood up, without saying a word, and was about to go out.

“Hey hey, where are you going?” Huang Xiong grabbed her.

The young man said bitterly, “I am going to go to Xiao Jue and ask clearly, why did he choose Lei hou over me? What exactly about me is not as good as Lei hou? Why was my name in the Forward Battalion!”

Hong Shan was taken aback. He didn’t expect He Yan to call the general’s name directly. He hurriedly stopped He Yan’s actions, “You can’t be so impulsive! Going to the General Xiao now will only make the General unhappy, and there will be even fewer chances for you to join the Forward Battalion in the future.”

“Yes, yes,” Mak persuaded clumsily, “Ahe, General Xiao may be deliberately keeping you for something else, such as going to another camp. You are so powerful, there is no reason not to choose you!”

“I’m already great,” He Yan’s face turned blue. “Let Xiao Jue stand in front of me. Let’s fight. I don’t think he can beat me either!”

Jiang Jiao quickly went to cover He Yan’s mouth. Her saying all these things showed that she was really angry.

Fearing that she would go down to find trouble with Xiao Jue out of anger, the people hurriedly pulled her back to her original spot and sat down. Huang Xiong said, “Young people can’t be so impatient, staying  in the wild and not worrying about the firewood, he is a general, and you are a recruit. If you want to speak on equal terms, wait for you to be appointed as a general in the future, before talking to him again!”

“That will have to wait ten or eight years,” Wang Ba muttered, “and even this much might not be enough.”

Jiang Jiao also said, “This General Xiao is also really… Clearly, we are the first and Lei Hou was defeated by He Yan. How could he abandon He Yan and choose Lei Hou?”

“I heard,” Wang Ba thought for a while, “That Lei Hou seems to have something to do with an Instructor here. He may be a relative and might have just gone through the back door. I think these nobles are so powerful and arrogant, they don’t care about the lower class.”

Mak couldn’t help but speak up, “Instructor Xiao is not that kind of person! There must be some misunderstanding here!”

Wang Ba glanced at him, “Whose side are you on?”

Little wheat closed his mouth and promised not to speak.

“Everyone,” He Yan said with restraint, “I have a terrible headache. Can you let me be quiet for a while?”

 Everyone fell silent immediately.

The bonfire throbbed in front of her, as the night reflected by the flames turned red. In any case, He Yan couldn’t understand why Xiao Jue would admit Lei Hou into the Forward Battalion.

She thought that she had been blind all along, but it was nowhere near Xiao Jue’s blindness. Could it be that all this time her performance in Liangzhou Wei was not good at all? She thought she couldn’t have performed any better or that she did not collect enough flags. But she had left no remaining flags for the others. Even the formation that ordinary recruits found difficult was broken by her. With such a talent, Xiao Jue was not at all tempted?

She wanted to take back her words when she said Xiao Jue was really good!

He Yan only felt her liver ached with anger and never thought that this was not the end of it. After a few moments later, Head Instructor Shen came over.

Under the eyes of everyone, he brought a small box over and said to everyone, “You are all here. It just so happens that you won first place in the flag race this time and tonight is also the Mid-Autumn Festival. This is your reward.”

Mak opened the box but saw that there was only a small jar of wine and a few silver bars in it.

“This is Eighteen Immortals, just such a small jar is worth a hundred taels,” the Head Instructor Shen said with satisfaction, “You can drink it tonight, don’t be greedy.”

“Eighteen Immortals,” Wang Ba smacked his lips, “I didn’t expect to be able to drink eighteen Immortals here. My old life is worth it!”

He forgot in an instant that he was still cursing, “Powerful nobleman”.

Huang Xiong also swallowed his saliva. They were all heroes who loved wine. Besides, it was a precious wine. Even someone as young as Mak who didn’t like wine grabbed an ingot of silver and took a bite in his hand.

This reward was not too big, but it was also by no means small. In the midst of joy, only He Yan seemed particularly out of place.

She just glanced at the box, let out a chuckle, and said, “It seems that our general is not doing very well.”

Shen Han was stunned.

“Poor as hell.” The young man didn’t even look at him, taking a branch to fiddle with the firewood. He lowered his head and mumbled to himself. Still, everyone could hear the essence in the words.

Hong Shan covered her mouth and smiled at Shen Han, “Our brother here is drunk, really drunk… muttering nonsense, the Head Instructor should be understanding with a child.”

Shen Han left inexplicably.

After Shen Han left, He Yan looked at the box on the ground and couldn’t help but sneer, “These meager things should be carried out to the beggars”

“Brother, this is a good thing.” Huang Xiong said patiently, “You are relocating your anger.”

He Yan was holding her anger and didn’t want to talk.

Huang Xiong sat down next to her, holding her shoulders, looking at the flames dancing in front of her, and said in a deep voice, “Young man, don’t be discouraged. It’s just a bump in the road. Look at me,” he pointed to himself. “You’d only lost a chance to enter the Forward Battalion. Whereas I lost everything back then.”

He was not willing to touch the jar of Eighteen Immortals, only pouring two large bowls of yellow wine from the jar next to He Yan — one for He Yan, and the other for himself. He took a sip and said, “What a strong wine!”

Seeing He Yan not speaking, he pointed to the Buddha beads on his neck and said, “This is my mother’s.”

The Buddha beads were dark and gleaming with a warm light, which appeared extremely disproportionate on his sturdy physique. Despite this, Huang Xiong had never taken it away. He pointed to the knife beside him again, “This knife has killed nineteen people.”

These words were a bit horrible, for a while, even Wang Ba and the others looked at him. He Yan moved his eyes slightly and looked at him.

Seeing her finally reacted, Huang Xiong said in a jarring voice, “I was as old as you back then. Our family had a sword manual that was passed down from our ancestors. When someone learned about it, they came to buy it. But my father refused to sell it.”

“I went to cool off with my companions at the time. After returning, our house was completely wiped out. All the belongings were in the house, only the manual was missing.”

 Mak exclaimed, “This…”

“Someone killed my Huang family for the sake of the sword.” When Huang Xiong said this, his expression was very calm, they didn’t know if it was because that too much time had passed, or it was because of something else. He said, “I reported to the officials but the local officials couldn’t manage the matter at all. So I personally investigated this matter. I ran away with my wealth, carrying the knife for thousands of miles and went away looking for the culprits. It took me three years to find where they were. “

“I was afraid I wouldn’t be able to seek revenge and would end up giving my own life. I was not afraid of death. But I didn’t want to die in vain. I was the only one left in the Huang family. If I died, there would be no one to seek justice for them. “

“So I pretended as a laborer for a long time and entered that mansion. I observed the terrain and their usual habits during the day and practiced swordsmanship hard at night. After a year and a half, I found an opportunity to take revenge for our Huang Family one night.”

This story was thrilling, but he told it lightly. The danger can be imagined. But there was only calmness in the eyes of the bald man. He looked at He Yan and said, “It is not too late for a gentleman to seek revenge ten years later. I tried my best to seek justice from them. In the end, they were still a powerful foe. But you see, now that the enemy is dead and I am still alive. I can still drink and eat meat with you here. So you say, who won?”

He wanted to take advantage of his own affairs and tell He Yan, not to be impulsive in a moment of anger.

He Yan smiled and was about to speak, but when Jiang Jiao stretched out his hand and poured himself a bowl of rice wine, he raised his head and took a big mouthful. He was not as good at drinking as Huang Xiong. His face was flushed with hot redness. He reached out and wiped his lips. With liquor stains, he blurted out, “That is, who doesn’t have a sad time. Just look at me, the young master of a martial arts school, as good as it might sound. I also had a fiancee. We were supposed to marry this year but she died.”

Mak’s eyes widened. As he was about to ask a question, he was hit by Shi and he quietened down.

“Do you know how she died?” Jiang Jiao’s eyes were a little red, and he muttered, “She died because of love. She liked someone else and refused to marry me, so she died because of her love with that scholar! You say, are you more miserable than me?”

It was no wonder that Jiang Jiao, with such good looks and skills, came to join the army. It might be after this incident, he became afraid, discouraged and simply wanted to stay away from his hometown.

Everyone looked at Wang Ba. Wang Ba was inexplicable, and then he was ashamed and said, “What are you looking at me for? I don’t have a story! What’s wrong with all of you? Why are you all bringing up the damn past? Are you here to compare who is worse off?”

# Chapter 86: **Do you like me?**

The lunar white dew fell as the clouds on the mountains cleared. The bonfire mixed with the fragrance of wine created an elegant and sparse ambience. Some of the recruits were eating and drinking with their heads bowed, while some raised their heads to talk and admire the moon. These all together became the unique scenery of Liangzhou Wei.

Sparks were brought along by the autumn wind, making people wonder whether it would burn their clothes. But in a few moments it became a fire, accompanied by a low whimper.

Mak sobbed, “I have forgotten what my parents look like…”

“I’m even worse,” Wang Ba said blankly, “I haven’t seen my parents since I was born.”

He Yan, “…” She raised her hand and poured herself a sip of wine, trying to calm herself down.

It was all to comfort her that everyone started comparing their unsatisfactory life events. In the end, it turned out into a competition in comparing who was worse off than the other. The recruits next to them were all laughing. It was only on their side, where there were gloomy clouds floating with the miserable wind .

Looking at Mak and Wang Ba who were crying, and then at the young master Jiang Jiao who was drinking alone with his eyes red, He Yan was speechless. Well, she didn’t know who was comforting who.

Huang Xiong glanced at her and said, “Brother He, you drink pretty well.”

He Yan was taken aback, looked down at herself. Unknowingly, she was already drinking her third bowl. She didn’t know how much the original Miss He could drink, and it occurred to her that the frail Miss He might not be able to drink such strong and pungent wine from such a broken bowl too. But to the former General Feihong, it was all a familiar situation.

When it is cold, when you feel afraid, when you feel uncomfortable, or even when you are hungry, if you have alcohol on hand, you can temporarily ward off all the tough times. Wine can drive away the cold, it can strengthen courage and can satisfy hunger, or even drench sorrows.

When she was in Shuojing, she didn’t drink any alcohol, for fear of being exposed. When she arrived in the Fuyue Army in Moxian, she gradually became accustomed to drinking. She has practised her drinking skills, and none of the young recruits in the camp could drink more than her. Sometimes, while celebrating a great victory, she would be the only one sober at the end of the banquet.

This may be the legendary solitude.

What surprised her was Shi. She thought that Shi grew up in the mountains, and he even looked sturdy. So she assumed him to be a good drinker, what she didn’t expect was that it took him only half a bowl of wine to fall sound asleep — drunk this fast?

His remaining half bowl of wine was taken away by his younger brother Mak. With Wang Ba, Mak drained the bowl and said, “I didn’t expect everyone to be the same and had fallen to the bottom of the world, so let’s just be a family in the future.” After saying all that, he sipped the wine and became drunk. The burning wine stabbed his nose red, and then, within the time of a stick of incense, he has also followed his eldest brother, lying down on his back drunk.

He Yan, “…they really are biological brothers.”

With Wang Ba suddenly losing his drinking partner, he went to hold Jiang Jiao’s shoulder while handing him a skewer of roasted rabbit meat and saying, “Don’t just drink wine, come and eat some meat.  Don’t worry even if your fiance didn’t choose you. It was only because there was no destiny between you two.” This is the first time he spoke like a human being, “Living in this world, gatherings and scatterings are bound by fate. There’s nothing that can be forced.”

Jiang Jiao took his rabbit meat, still drinking without uttering a word. Huang Xiong smiled when he saw this. He looked at the moon in the sky and said to himself, “I miss my family.”

He Yan took out a dumpling from the snack basket that Cheng Lisu gave her. The moon dumplings were small and shaped like diamond flowers, with the red “Happy flower and moon gazing” written on it. She took a bite and tasted the sweetness of sesame and peach kernels.

“If they were alive, I wouldn’t be here, I’d be in my hometown,” Huang Xiong said, “My mother’s cooking is delicious… I want to eat her cooking.”

He Yan lowered her head and ate the cake silently. Huang Xiong asked, “What about you?” He turned his head and looked at He Yan, “How did you used to spend this time of the year in the past?”

The usual Mid-Autumn Festival? He Yan was in a bit of a trance.

Before she joined the army, she had spent the Mid-Autumn Festival at the He family with others. Her status was special and there were people watching her wherever she went so she usually didn’t have any free time. In fact, she actually liked the hustle bustle of the moon festival, but it was inconvenient for her because she used to wear a mask. She was an embarrassing existence in the He family. Though in terms of identity, she was a legitimate daughter of the bloodline, she neither belonged to the first nor the second house.

After she started serving the military in Moxian County for three years, at the beginning, she was in fear every day for not knowing when she would end up dying on the battlefield. Mid-Autumn Festival? Who would even have the time to think about it?.

Later, she returned to the capital and was married to the Xu family. At this time last year, she was already blind.

Even the hope of spending the moon festival with that person was not fulfilled, and she was plunged into darkness. At that time, she thought she couldn’t get out, and that washow she would be spending all her life. So on the 15th of August, she asked Xu Zhiheng to take her up to the mountain to worship the Buddha, hoping that the Bodhisattva would bless her and allow her to see the light again. Xu Zhiheng also agreed.

In fact, on that day, she didn’t really want to ask the Bodhisattva for blessing.

She felt pain on the tip of her tongue. She had accidentally bit her own tongue, and the sweet taste was covered with the tingling pain for a short time. He Yan recovered, avoiding Huang Xiong’s gaze, and said casually, “Just like this, it’s almost the same as now. “

“Seeing you is akin to seeing myself from the past.” Huang Xiong took a sip of wine and said, “You are just like me from back then.”

He Yan smiled and said, “Brother, my family is living well.” Even better than most people.

“But you are not reconciled.” She heard Huang Xiong’s voice and looked sideways. The face of the bald man showed the wisdom and vicissitudes of a middle-aged man who had gone through the good and bad. He touched the Buddha beads and said, “You have a great sense of hatred and have yet repaid your revenge. Your heart is not willing, so whenever you feel distressed, you always end up trapping yourself in your thoughts.”

He Yan’s heart moved, but she didn’t speak.

“I don’t know what your hatred is,” he looked at the moon, “you sometimes look the same as me.”

He Yan was a little at a loss, does she really show that much? She always thought she was covering up well.

“It will be fine one day.” The big man lowered his head and patted her shoulder, “You have to believe this.”

He Yan didn’t speak, and silently picked up the wine bowl to drink. Huang Xiong stopped talking, started eating meat and drinking on his own. Wang Ba was also a little drunk. He sat on the spot with his head and smirked, while Jiang Jiao buried his head in his knees, not knowing whether he was crying or has fallen asleep.

…

The instructors also gathered together to eat meat and drink over the bonfire, as the hard training over the past few days has finally reaped results in this group of recruits. They were quite at ease, and even Cheng Lisu was there. The young master from Beijing, who has never experienced this kind of novelty, felt that even the roasted rabbit leg sprinkled with coarse salt was delicious. Originally, he wanted to have some free time to talk to He Yan, but with just a single sip of wine, he felt that his legs were weak and he couldn’t walk, so he just sat back down again.

The instructors laughed kindly, and someone said, “Master Cheng has to work on his drinking capacity. With this amount of alcohol, you can’t be my Liangzhou Wei’s sons!”

“I didn’t belong to your Liangzhou Guards,” Cheng Lisu muttered, “I just came to have fun.”

This child can always justify his “no” so righteously. If he were the son of the instructors’ own family, he would have been picked up and beaten up a long time ago. But this person was Xiao Jue’s nephew, so everyone said, “Master Cheng is so open-minded!” “It’s not good to drink, and even my lady doesn’t allow me to drink! Let’s all learn from Master Cheng!”

“But Master Cheng,” Liang Ping asked him, “Is the General really not coming out to have fun with us?”

“Uncle doesn’t like places that are too noisy,” Cheng Lisu replied, “He definitely won’t come.”

Everyone felt a little regretful, and some people even thought that Xiao Jue was too unreasonable. After all, this was the Mid-Autumn Festival. A general who does not have fun with his subordinates during the Mid-Autumn festival would be too arrogant to even have a deep relationship with his subordinates.

But some people didn’t mind, Ma Damei smiled, “Should I send some wine and food to the General. It’s not good to be alone during the festival.”

“It’s not necessary,” Cheng Lisu said, “My uncle can’t drink this inferior rice wine.”

Everyone, “…”

Well, after all, that was the second son from Shuojing’s Xiao family, and no one could force him to drink.

Du Mao curiously asked, “Master Cheng, do you know how good the General’s drinking capacity is? I heard that General Feihong does not become drunk even after a thousand cups. I wonder if the General is better or worse than General Feihong?”

When the instructors heard the words, Cheng Lisu’s eyes suddenly looked bright. Any discussions about General Feihong or General Feng Yun being more powerful are always interesting. From swordsmanship to drinking capacity, from height to temperament, people have to compare them one by one. It was a pity that apart from being former classmates, these two have never appeared together, nor have they competed personally. Moreover, General Feihong has always been wearing a mask. It was still a mystery who was better.

“Of course it’s my uncle.” Cheng Lisu replied without thinking, “I have never seen my uncle drunk from the time when I grew up.”

In fact, Cheng Lisu has never seen Xiao Jue drink. However, it was impossible for him to say this in front of the instructors. No matter how good General Feihong was, he certainly couldn’t be better than his uncle.

“Let’s just stop, don’t talk about people behind their back.” Shen Han waved his hand, “Drink up, drink up, why are you all chattering like a woman! Master Cheng, come, I will toast you a glass… Master Cheng?”

 Master Cheng had red cheeks and was already drunk.

…

It was night, the blue curtain covered the bright moon, and the figure fell into a sparse shadow. The sound of autumn was quiet, and someone was playing the zither.

Mulan on the moon seems to have bones, and Ling Bing embraces people like jade[1]. The long sword hung on the wall like frost like snow, and the young man dressed in outer clothes was handsome and calm, stoking the strings of zither, making emotionally moving and intoxicating sounds.

He played “Streaming Light”.

The sound of the zither was long and distant, like a bead or jade, this was the Mid-Autumn Festival night, the time of reunion. Even though Liangzhou Wei’s instructors and recruits were thousands of miles away from their family, they were still gathered together, singing and drinking, not as quiet as him. He didn’t seem to notice it either, he just plucked the strings seriously, and the bundled blue silk hung over his shoulders, and the moonlight gave him a layer of deserted color.

From spring to autumn, from summer to winter, it seems to be just a blink of an eye.

The moonlight lined with the sound of zither was a little colder and quieter, and the night sky was as clear as water, as the sound of the zither seemed to float endlessly in the sky, making people want to shed tears.

Suddenly, something hit the yard, making a crisp sound, interrupting the quiet sound of the zither. Xiao Jue moved for a while and raised his head. Through the window, he could see that something was thrown in again from outside the courtyard wall.

He paused for a moment, stood up, and pushed the door out. At this moment, the third thing came in and fell right next to him. He bent over to pick it up and found that it was a stone.

Fei Nu showed as a shadow from behind, and whispered, “Master, outside…”

Xiao Jue opened the courtyard door.

A young man in red stood outside with a small jar of wine in his hand. The wine cork had been pulled out, and the aroma was rich, it was eighteen immortals.

He was generous, even if it was just a small jar of wine, ordinary people would hide it for a long time before they are willing to even take a sip. Seeing his appearance, he has already drunk a lot.

This person was He Yan.

Xiao Jue looked at her indifferently, He Yan’s eyes widened, as if he could see his appearance clearly, and said, “Xiao Jue?”

Fei Nu behind him couldn’t help but glance at He Yan. He actually called the young master’s name directly, really bold.

“What are you doing here?” Xiao Jue asked him.

“I thought and thought.” The boy didn’t know how much he had drunk was covered with the smell of alcohol, but his expression was as usual. Not showing the slightest hint of being drunk, and no one could tell whether he was drunk or not. He said, “You chose Lei Hou for the forward camp. I was very unconvinced, so Xiao Jue” the boy continued, and the corner of his mouth curled, “Let’s have a fight!”

Before he even finished his words, he went straight to Xiao Jue!

Seeing this, the Fei Nu behind him was about to step forward and heard Xiao Jue’s command, “Don’t move.” He didn’t dare to move immediately.

The young man flew forward and raised his fist at Xiao Jue, Xiao Jue turned sideways to avoid him, curling his eyebrows to look at him.

He Yan had no weapons and came with bare hands. It would be too stupid to say that he was an assassin. But his words were clear, his eyes were clear, and he didn’t look like a drunk maniac. Xiao Jue simply looked at him in his spare time to see what he wanted to do. He Yan who couldn’t land a hit turned around again.

The young man was agile and sincerely wanted to fight, but the method used was awkward and rough. At first glance, it looked like a schoolboy fighting in the school. They only knew how to greet people with their fists, but they didn’t care how accurate the hit was.

Xiao Jue turned sideways to avoid again, and He Yan failed two consecutive sneak attacks and said to herself in confusion, “When did my skills get so bad?”

Fei Nu who was standing on the side, “…”

Does this young man think he can beat the Second Young Master Xiao? I heard that Liangzhou Wei’s He Yan had no eyes and was arrogant, and seeing this right now, it is really true. The young master is really good-tempered, and he didn’t put the kid who was uttering such wild words directly out of the door.

She has been defeated repeatedly and fought repeatedly, but she didn’t feel discouraged. She immediately came forward again. This time she was still avoided by Xiao Jue. Xiao Jue was about to speak when he suddenly saw a black object behind him rushing towards him. He frowned and without thinking about anything he drew out the Yin Qiu Sword and slashed it horizontally.

With a sound of “clatter,” the thing shattered. He stepped back and was not touched. He Yan, who came with that thing, couldn’t avoid it, and was poured from head to toe.

The moon was full; the wind was dewy; the laurel was in full bloom, and the wine was full of fragrance. Fragments of eighteen immortals were scattered on the ground, and each piece was clear and full of aroma. The young man’s clothes also became fragrant, and he frowned.

She seemed to be awakened by the fragments of the wine jar all over the floor. She looked at Xiao Jue and took a step forward, like a little lady who had trampled on a pearl hairpin in the flower market, and said, “You broke it, so you should pay for it!”

Fei Nu looked at it and felt that this young man was really drunk, otherwise he would not speak so confidently and subversively. He whispered to Xiao Jue, “Master, do you want your subordinates to take him away?”

Xiao Jue raised his hand to stop and shook his head gently.

The master and servant had been together for so many years, and with one look they can know what was in each other’s mind. Fei Nu immediately understood that the reason Xiao Jue didn’t throw He Yan out in the first place was not because of his good temper, but rather he just wanted to give He Yan a try. This young man was now suspicious, and there were doubts all over his body. If he could ask something out of his drunkenness, he could save so much effort. If he was pretending to be drunk tonight and was actually here for something else, then their hearts would be condemned and it would be even more unforgivable.

Fei Nu hid in the tree and stopped speaking.

Xiao Jue turned around and walked into the house, and said as he walked, “Why should I pay?”

After hearing the words, the young man rushed into Xiao Jue’s house. She ran extremely fast, while staggering, and rushed ahead of Xiao Jue, blocking Xiao Jue’s path, and said, “Do you know who I am?”

Xiao Jue laughed, his eyes cold, “Who are you?”

He Yan slapped her thigh, “A great man who doesn’t have his name changed? I, He Yan! Liangzhou Wei is number one!”

“Number one in Liangzhou wei?” Xiao Jue looked at her with a faint smile, “Who told you?”

“Do you still need someone to tell?” I don’t know whether the boy was drunk or not, his tone is amazing like it was a matter of fact, “I know it in my heart.”

Xiao Jue walked around him sideways, put down his sword, picked up the teapot on the table to pour tea for himself, and then took a step. The young man followed like a tail again, stood in front of him, and asked him, “You say, am I short?”

Is this person drunk and likes to compare tall and short with others? Xiao Jue glanced at the top of his hair that had just reached his chest, and nodded, “Short.”

He Yan, “I am not short!”

Xiao Jue, “…”

He Yan asked him again, “Am I stupid?”

Xiao Jue stopped pouring tea in his hand, stared at him, and said slowly, “Stupid.”

He Yan, “I’m not stupid!”

Xiao Jue suddenly regretted that he didn’t throw He Yan out of the yard initially and instead invited him here for trouble. Except for listening to his nonsense here, it seemed that he wouldn’t get any useful news. Either He Yan was too stupid, or he was too shrewd to leak anything.

“What else do you want to boast about yourself, together.” He lowered his eyes and spoke indifferently.

He Yan, “I am tall and mighty, fierce and invincible, handsome and refined, and I am so righteous. Such a man of lofty ideals. Why, why does no one like me? Do you know how hard I have been working?”

Xiao Jue, “…”

“Because of you, I am very upset tonight at the Mid-Autumn Festival. Let me ask you.” She took a step forward, approached Xiao Jue at the extreme distance, looked up at him, and asked earnestly, “Do you like me?”

Xiao Jue took a step back, distanced herself from her, and dusted the sleeves deformed by her, as if seeing the plague god, calmly replied, “I am not a broken sleeve.”

“Neither am I.” He Yan murmured, raising her head suddenly, with a look of grief and anger, and asked loudly, “Then why do you prefer Lei Hou to me! Apart from being a little taller than me, how can he be as good as me? In terms of appearance, skill, or in terms of our past affection, Xiao Jue, you are too much, too insensitive! I am very disappointed!”

At this time, Shen Han was walking outside the house, intending to give Xiao Jue some roasted rabbit meat, covered his mouth with a surprised expression. Just now, he seemed to have heard some incredible secret.

Inside the room, the young man wearing only the moon white shirt looked at the people in front of him speechlessly. The young man looked up at himself, his eyes were bright, his tone was not afraid or hesitant, and he calmly made people wonder what was going on in her head.

What past affection? He has only given him mandarin duck pot for injury medicine before, and now it became a love point of their past affection. This person is too self-conscious.

“But it’s nothing,” the young man suddenly raised his mouth, smiled slyly, and whispered, “If you pick Lei Hou to enter the forward camp, I will go to Lei Hou every day for sparring, ten times with ten defeats, so that everyone in Liangzhou Wei can see that you, Xiao Jue, are a blind man, and that it’s a shame. Let’s see, what would you do then?”

Xiao Jue, “…”

After finishing these words, He Yan burped. Her body tilted and fell on Xiao Jue’s soft couch. When she fell, half of her body slumped on the zither, pressing the strings, making a piercing “clang”, as it fell to the ground.

Standing in the middle of the room, Xiao Jue’s eyebrows were faintly throbbing, only to feel that today’s idea of ​​arguing while drinking was terrible and couldn’t be worse.

At first glance, he saw a figure hesitating by the door, and he said coldly, “What are you doing out there if you don’t want to come in?”

Shen Han was startled and came over tremblingly. He heard the secret at the door just now, and when he entered the yard, he was seen by the Fei Nu, so he could neither enter nor retreat. At this moment, the General was also in a bad mood.

“I took some freshly roasted rabbit meat from outside, thinking that the General might have it for dinner, so I came to send it specially.” Shen Han put the barbecued meat wrapped in oil paper on the table, “General, you may enjoy it slowly, and I will retreat first.”

“Hold on.” Xiao Jue said displeased, “Can’t you see such a big living person?”

He motioned Shen Han to look at He Yan. Shen Han looked at He Yan, and his heart moved. He only heard He Yan’s words of having a close relationship with Xiao Jue. At this moment, this young man was sleeping so generously on Xiao Jue’s couch. That’s the couch of Second young master Xiao! In the entire Liangzhou Wei, I am afraid that no one has the guts to do this, and there might only be this one person.

The relationship between the two of them is really extraordinary!

Xiao Jue walked to the front of the couch, holding He Yan’s neck collar with his hands, lifting her up, and throwing her in front of Shen Han, “Your man, take it away.”

“Don’t dare, don’t dare.” Shen Han said.

Xiao Jue, “What?”

Shen Han hurriedly saidm “I meant that Liangzhou Wei’s recruits are under the supervision of the capital. How can it be said that they are subordinates? They are the people of the capital superintendent.”

Xiao Jue smiled angrily, “Shen Han, you are talking a lot today.”

“I understand,” Shen Han lingered, “Subordinate will take him away!” Only when he turned and walked halfway, Shen Han asked, ” General, where should I send this young man to?”

Xiao Jue looked at him calmly, “Would you like to deliver him to your home?”

“No, no need!” Shen Han said with a numb scalp, “He Yan…let’s send him back to his room!”

After Shen Han left, Fei Nu walked into the house.

Xiao Jue had picked up the zither on the ground. Thanks to He Yan’s pressure, one of the strings broke. Looking at the broken string, the youth couldn’t help but squeeze his forehead.

“Master,” Fei Nu looked in Shen Han’s direction, “Master Shen is being a bit weird today.”

“He’s often weird.” Xiao Jue replied.

“Master, what do you think, was He Yan drunk?”

Xiao Jue put the zither in place, and the tea he planned to drink while talking with He Yan was already cooled down. He threw out the cold tea, poured another cup, and said with a sip, “Not sure.”

Not sure if He Yan was drunk or not, because a normal sober person probably wouldn’t talk to him like this. But looking at her pace, words and expression, there was no trace of chaos. Most importantly, he did nothing tonight except crushing a zither, smashing a jug of wine, and saying a lot of crazy things here, including revealing which side he was on.

This is confusing.

“He seems to be quite critical about Lei Hou being able to enter the forward camp.” Fei Nu said, “Does he want to enter the forward camp.”

Xiao Jue ridiculed, “It’s not just the forward camp, he was sure to win the entry to Nine Banners battalion against me.”

“Then…” Fei Nu asked, “Can’t you just send him to the forward battalion?

“No,” Xiao Jue said, “I have other arrangements.”

Fei Nu stopped talking, and Xiao Jue thought of what He Yan had just said, that he would find Lei Hou every day to spar with him, just to prove his poor decision. This kind of rogue behavior is really handy for this person.

Looking at the mess in the house again. There was debris everywhere in the yard. I have to find some free time to go to Liangzhou City to ask the master to mend up the zither. He Yan still had the cheeks to say, “Because of you, I am feeling very upset at this Mid-Autumn festival.” It really doesn’t make sense.

The young man stood in the room, as beautiful as jade, like a green pine, tall and straight, for a long while, and sneered, “What a mad man.”

    …

Shen Han, who carried He Yan outside, was also very upset.

When the bystanders saw it, they looked at Shen Han in surprise, and said, “He Yan is drunk, why is the Chief Instructor still carrying him?”

Shen Han didn’t utter a word with a sullen face. If the relationship between He Yan and Xiao Jue was known to everyone, Shen Han would find someone else to take He Yan back. But now that he knew they had a close relationship, how could Shen Han dare to neglect.

He Yan just said that he had “past feelings” with Xiao Jue! It seemed that they had known each other a long time ago, so why did the general pretend not to know He Yan and was even secretly investigating He Yan’s identity. Could it be that the two of them were good in the first place, but after a lot of changes occurred in the middle of the process, they became what they are now?

It was no wonder that the people of Wei knew that Governor Xiao was not close to women. He looked like this, and was one of the best outstanding heroes. So many women rushed forward, with countless stunning looks, yet he was unmoved. It turned out he didn’t like them at all!

At the door of Xiao Jue, He Yan said, “Why do you like Lei Hou and not me” in a stern tone, and those who heard it might weep tears. It is a pity that the General’s heart was as hard as iron, and he was completely unmoved. Shen Han thought wildly, the more nervous he was, the more strange stories he remembered.

For example, He Yan and Xiao Jue did know each other before, and they had a good relationship for a while. Only later when Xiao Jue found out that He Yan’s identity was different that he cut off the love thread and drew a clear line with the other party. He Yan, young and unwilling, knew that Xiao Jue was coming to Liangzhou, so he joined the army and went to the camp, asking Xiao Jue for an explanation. Even working harder and wanting to enter the forward camp to impress Xiao Jue.

He Yan did a good job, but to avoid suspicions, Xiao Jue even named Lei Hou. He Yan was sad and anguished. He couldn’t help but drink his sorrows. After drinking, he confided in his true feelings and found Xiao Jue to ask for an explanation.

The stone-hearted General Xiao categorically refused, but it was only a trace of old feelings that made him let He Yan sleep on his own soft couch.

Very well, Shen Han applauded for himself in his heart. It was very reasonable. That should be the case.

[1] That’s a line of a classical poetry “spring night.” I guess I am not very familiar with the poem so translation might not be correct.

# Chapter 87: **Substitute again**

The next day after the Mid-Autumn Festival. It was a rainy day. When He Yan woke up, the others were all asleep on the bunk, probably because they hadn’t awoken from the wine last night. It was because the order to run outside had been sounded. Even if it was raining, they had to train. She got up from the bed and started waking up everyone in the room.

“My head is so dizzy,” Mak was too young to resist his hangover, and was still feeling the aftereffects, “Brother Ahe, what are you doing?”

He Yan handed him the water bag, “Hurry up, take two sips, wash your face, it’s time to run.”

Mak took the water bag and drank, Hong Shan saw this, smiled and said, “Mak, you and your brother have to train more. How can you drink only that much? You aren’t as good as your Brother Ahe.”

Mak glanced at He Yan and said, “Brother Ahe, can you drink really well?”

“Just so-so.” He Yan said perfunctorily. She wasn’t even feeling a headache, but instead she was feeling quite refreshed. However, she has forgotten how she returned to the room. She only remembered that she was drinking with Huang Xiong in front of the bonfire and after drinking a few bowls, it seemed that she has opened the 18 immortals… right, what happened to the 18 immortals?

“Why don’t I see the jar of wine rewarded by General Xiao?” Hong Shan also remembered, “That’s a good thing, it cannot be lost.”

“Maybe it’s with Wang Ba.” He Yan replied. After carefully tracing back her memories again, she recalled nothing.

She originally drank alcohol and was known as not being drunk even in a thousand glasses, but in fact, it was not true. She would also become drunk if she drinks too much, but He Yan was different from others when she gets drunk. Whenever she was drunk, she never showed any signs on her face, and would look particularly sober. When she was in the army, she was drunk once and still was able to discuss the art of war with the military commander in the camp for a night, while looking radiant. On the next day, the military commander even praised He Yan as a rare hero. In fact, He Yan did not even remember what she did last night.

Even if she’s drunk, people can’t tell. Nor will she walk in vain and talk nonsense. So, it would be impossible for anyone to see the gaffe. But what did she exactly do last night?

She couldn’t think of anything, so after everyone hurriedly washed their faces and cleaned up, they went outside to get dry bread and run.

After the rain, the ground was wet, so they couldn’t run too fast to avoid slipping. He Yan ran, feeling that someone was looking at her. Following the gaze, she saw the chief instructor Shen Han standing at the end of the horse path, staring at her unblinkingly, with a complicated expression.

Seeing He Yan looking over, Shen Han looked away. This all felt very strange, she was extremely sensitive to people’s gazes, and Shen Han’s appearance seemed to be thinking about something. She looked at Shen Han again, but Shen Han had already walked away.

Probably He Yan’s gaze at Shen Han was too obvious, and a recruit who was running next toher said, “The chief Instructor is so fierce, but he is still very good to you. What is the relationship between you two, how come he is taking care of you like this?”

“Taking care of me?” He Yan inexplicably, “How come I don’t know.”

If Shen Han really took care of her, he wouldn’t have ordered Lei Hou to go to the forward camp.

“Last night, when we went back, we watched Chief Instructor Shen personally carrying you back to the room.” The recruit seemed to be dissatisfied. “You are too ungrateful. If it was me, Chief Instructor Shen would not be so considerate at all.”

He Yan was stunned.

She asked, “Did you really see Chief Instructor Shen carry me back last night?”

“Yeah,” the recruit looked at her strangely, “You don’t remember? You probably don’t remember, you were drunk.” He said, and after that because his companions in front of him were begging him to catch up soon so regardless of He Yan’s expression, he hurried to the front.

He Yan was left behind alone, and her surprise was hard to conceal. Was she drunk? Shen Han actually carried her back?

What was the reason for all this? She asked Hong Shan and the others in the morning, Hong Shan and the others were drunk early, and were dragged back by the recruits in the same room. When He Yan came back, no one was awake, and they didn’t know when He Yan came back or how she came back.

He Yan didn’t think that Shen Han was being a considerate person.

She thought about it until the end of the run but still wasn’t able to figure out what was going on. So she made up her mind and waited until the end of the run to find Huang Xiong and the others before the start of the drill. Perhaps Huang Xiong knew, but if Huang Xiong didn’t know either, she would directly ask Shen Han.

After the run was over, everyone ran to sheltering straw sheds or tents to hide from the rain and drink water. Cheng Lisu also came.

This young man was holding an oil-paper umbrella with a few red and white koi painted on it, which looked quite interesting. He couldn’t find He Yan, so he asked around and finally found someone under the straw shed.

“Brother He!” he shouted.

He Yan didn’t expect Cheng Lisu to come to her, so she got up and walked to him, strangely said, “It’s raining so heavily, why didn’t you stay in the house?”

“This is not a place to talk.” Cheng Lisu took her to hide under the umbrella. After looking for a long time, he found the side of the long frame by the back of the flag stand in the martial arts field, then stopped, looked at He Yan and said, “I was drunk yesterday. But this morning I heard my uncle talking to Big Brother Fei Nu, and I got to know that you went to look for my uncle last night.”

“I went to find your uncle?” He Yan was shocked.

“Correct.”

He Yan couldn’t believe it, she actually went to Xiao Jue’s? Lately, she was feeling quite unhappy with Xiao Jue. It was also because of the matters of the Forward Battalion. So looking for Xiao Jue would definitely not be to be drinking tea or catching up about the good old days. If not this, then…

“What did I do when I looked for your uncle?” He Yan asked slowly.

Cheng Lisu hesitated to say, “Last night, you were probably drunk…”

He Yan, “…”

She tried her best to make herself smile as usual, and said, “Carry on, I can handle it.”

“You challenged my uncle for a fight and you crushed his zither.” Cheng Lisu answered honestly.

He Yan closed his eyes.

“Who won?” she asked.

Cheng Li Su didn’t expect that He Yan was still concerned about the result at this time. He scratched his head and said, “It’s probably my uncle. I heard that he asked Master Shen to take you back.”

He Yan, “…” Okay, she really went to Xiao Jue while she was drunk, and she even lost. Now, Xiao Jue would not like her even more, and she was even far away from entering the Nine Banners Battalion.

He Yan felt discouraged, thinking that it would be impossible to get to enter Nine Banner Battalion through Xiao Jue. Only if there was a different path… Or as before, she could just slowly rise through the ranks, although this plan might be a little slow…  And she just doesn’t know how many ranks she would have to reach up to be as close to He Rufei?

Cheng Lisu looked at her sympathetically, and tried to comfort her, “Brother He, in fact, you don’t have to be discouraged. My uncle… My uncle is actually not so careless. I came to tell you that these days, you’d better not go to my uncle and save him from getting angry. That zither is very expensive. He didn’t let you pay for it, he’s already being very generous.”

“I can’t afford it either.” He Yan replied in frustration.

“Look, things aren’t so bad.” Cheng Lisu added, “You don’t have to be too sad, I will put in good words for you in front of my uncle!”

 He Yan said listlessly, “Thank you so much.”

Cheng Lisu left, and He Yan looked at the distant figures of the red and white koi, feeling weak for a while. Originally, the brothers from her camp used to say that drinking was a mistake. She never took it seriously. But now it seemed to be true. She had only gotten drunk once after coming to Liangzhou, and she stirred up such a big trouble.

Why did Shen Han carry her back to the room? Was it because he witnessed such a chaotic moment, knowing that I will no longer be favored by Xiao Jue in the future, and my career would be hopeless, so he was being sympathetic to me.

He Yan said in her heart, “Anyways, let’s find a chance to go to Xiao Jue to apologize, apologize sincerely, maybe I still can be saved?”

 …

At this moment, Xiao Jue was sitting at the table in the room of the prefect of the right military general, looking at the post in his hand.

The post was made by Sun Xiangfu, the Governor of Liangzhou, saying that in a few days, Yuan Baozhen, the supervisor from the capital, will arrive in Liangzhou. The Governor would be hosting a banquet for him, and together with Xiao Jue, Cheng Lisu is also invited.

Fei Nu was right behind Xiao Jue and said, “Master, it is inconvenient to take Master Cheng to the city. It’s a welcoming banquet, I’m afraid there might be threats.”

“Yuan Baozhen has a private association with Xu Jingfu and has long been one of his men.” Xiao Jue played with the post in his hand, looked at the sweet-scented osmanthus tree in the window, and said calmly, “This time it was aimed at me, but I happen to want to know what chess pieces Xu Jingfu has planted in Liangzhou.”

“What does the Young Master mean?” Fei Nu asked hesitantly.

“Yuan Baozhen is Xu Jingfu’s person. Sun Xiangfu may not be different.” Xiao Jue said, “The governor of Liangzhou should have changed a long time ago.”

“Young master is planning to go to the banquet, and I would also follow along, but Young Master Cheng needs someone to protect him if he stays in the guardhouse. Else, if someone tries to commit a crime…” He didn’t finish, he was referring to He Yan. Currently, in Liangzhou wei there is a young man whose identity was unknown and extremely dangerous. The person was He Yan.

“Besides, Young Master Cheng trusts He Yan very much. If the Young Master is not here…” If Cheng Lisu listened to He Yan, or was simply calculated by He Yan, the gain would not be worth the loss.

“When will Luan Ying arrive in Liangzhou?” Xiao Jue asked.

“Luan Ying is still in Lou County right now.” Fei Nu replied, and looked at Xiao Jue again, “Master, how about rejecting the invitation?”

“No,” Xiao Jue lowered his eyes, “we must go to this banquet.”

 …

When Cheng Lisu came back, he saw Xiao Jue sitting at his desk reading a book. It was a messy book of words he had quietly bought from the Chief Instructor with silvers. He was shocked. He stepped forward and said, “Uncle!”

Xiao Jue was flipping through his book. Hearing this, he shook his hand, looked at him, frowned and said, “Who are you?”

“I… I was wrong!” Cheng Lisu said.

“Wrong about what?” Xiao Jue looked at him calmly.

He didn’t seem to be angry? Cheng Lisu was surprised that Xiao Jue didn’t scold him for not practicing his calligraphy. Looking at those messy scripts, he guessed that Xiao Jue was in a good mood today, so he shyly said, “Right, I’m acknowledging a mistake on behalf of my elder brother. I heard that my eldest brother asked you for a fight last night… No, for sparring, uncle. You are not angry, right?”

Thinking of the madman who went mad last night and breaking his zither, Xiao Jue’s eyes darkened and his tone was as indifferent as before, “No.”

“That’s good! Uncle, you are still so generous!” Cheng Lisu hurriedly flattered.

Xiao Jue glanced at him, took out a post from his arms and threw it on his face, “See it for yourself.”

“What is this?” Cheng Lisu picked it up and looked at it as he said, “Isn’t this a post? Someone sent a post to my uncle and my name is there too. Is this for visiting Liangzhou City? Great! I’m almost growing mushrooms on my brain\*, staying all day in the guardhouse. Let’s see… Supervising Imperial Official Yuan Baozhen… Why does this name sound familiar?” He looked suspiciously at Xiao Jue, “Uncle, who is Yuan Baozhen?”

[Editor note: Growing mushrooms means he’s getting bored from staying all day in the guardhouse.]

“Don’t you remember?” Xiao Jue curled his lips and reminded him, “The marriage between you and Miss Song was suggested by Lord Yuan and your father. Song Ci was once Lord Yuan’s superior.”

“Song, Song family?” Cheng Lisu loosened his hand that was holding the post and the post fell to his feet as if he hadn’t seen it. He just stared at Xiao Jue blankly, looking uncertain, “Why did the Song family come to Liangzhou? “

“It’s not the Song family,” Xiao Jue said calmly, “It’s Yuan Baozhen.”

“Isn’t that all the same…” Cheng Lisu murmured, “They came to Liangzhou and specially invited me over to a banquet. Could it be that they wanted to take me back to Shuojing. I don’t want to marry her…I don’t want to get married…” He seemed to recover suddenly, grabbing Xiao Jue’s sleeve, “Uncle, you can’t just watch your own nephew jump into the fire pit!”

“What does it matter to me?” Xiao Jue pulled his sleeves out of his hand and flipped through the book carelessly.

“It has a lot to do with you!” Cheng Lisu walked around the table and came to Xiao Jue’s side, “Uncle, you know I don’t like Miss Song! If I were to marry her, I would rather die. I will hang myself on the day of marriage! Uncle! You won’t have to see me die if you save me!”

Xiao Jue stopped his movements, looked at him indifferently, drew out the long sword around his waist, and put it on the table.

Cheng Lisu stammered, “What, what is this?”

“You can kill yourself now and see if I really bear to see you die or not.”

Cheng Lisu stared at the knife and said with a sobbing face, “Uncle, I really don’t want to return to Shuojing. I have been with you for half a year. I have long been used to the life of the Liangzhou guardhouse. I really can’t live without you.” He hugged Xiao Jue’s leg and started crying.

Xiao Jue pressed his forehead, seemingly unable to endure more, and said, “Get up.”

Cheng Lisu didn’t move.

“Don’t let me say it again. Get up.”

Cheng Lisu still held Xiao Jue’s leg and looked at him while blinking his eyes, “Unless you promise me that you would not hand me over to the Song family.”

“Didn’t you say that you’ve gotten bored from staying at the guardhouse and wanted to go to Liangzhou City?”

“I don’t want to anymore!”

The youth’s voice was faint, “That’s Yuan Baozhen, the Supervisory Official.”

“Uncle, you are still Fengyun’s General Xiao Huaijin!”

“Yuan Baozhen has met you and also knows that you are hiding here in Liangzhou. What if he complains to the Song family about your negligence?”

Cheng Lisu immediately replied, “How could he have seen me? I have never met him. I look like this and my parents don’t even see me that much. If he had met me, he would not recommend me to Lord Song. Miss Song and I wouldn’t have been matched up at all!”

“Really,” Xiao Jue’s eyes moved slightly, looking at the grieving young man, “I must go. Since he hasn’t seen you, it’s not impossible.”

Cheng Lisu’s eyes widened.

“Find someone to replace you and go to the banquet.”

Cheng Lisu was stunned for a while and finally realized it after a long time. He stopped howling and didn’t hold Xiao Jue’s leg to fake a cry. He stood up and clapped his hands, “Wonderful! What my uncle said is very true. Anyways, since he hadn’t seen me, I can just find someone to replace me”

“Do you have someone in mind?”

Cheng Lisu looked at him, “I…”

“In Liangzhou guardhouse, it seems that there is no teenager who is the same age and stature as you.” Xiao Jue said, “If the difference is too large, you will be found out.”

In the entire barracks of the Liangzhou Guards Station, most of them were big and thick men. Even younger ones were more sturdy and dark. Cheng Lisu was a young master from the capital, who was raised in gold and jade, with fine skin and tender meat. He was different from the recruits in the barracks.

“If you can’t find anyone, you’d better go yourself.” Xiao Jue said nonchalantly.

“Who said I can’t find anyone!” Cheng Li was anxious, and his heart had an idea, “My elder brother, my elder brother is almost like me!”

Xiao Jue raised his eyebrows, noncommittal, “He Yan?”

“Yes, my elder brother. My elder brother is about the same age as me, he has a similar body, and he is smart, so he will be able to deal with Yuan Baozhen well. Yuan Baozhen may be able to take me away, but not necessarily so for my eldest brother.”

Cheng Lisu was very biased towards He Yan. In his opinion, He Yan was the most omnipotent person besides his uncle. He Yan would definitely be able to do things that others can’t do.

Seeing that Xiao Jue was silent, Cheng Lisu’s heart tightened. Recalling that He Yan went to fight with Xiao Jue last night, at this moment, Xiao Jue was definitely still angry at He Yan because of it and may not even want to see He Yan. Just as he was trying to figure out how to persuade Xiao Jue, he saw his young uncle closing the book on his hands and saying indifferently, “Okay.”

Cheng Lisu’s words of persuasion stuck in his throat. He only had the time to say, “Ah?”

Xiao Jue looked at him, “If you can persuade your elder brother, let him replace you.”

 …

After the drill was over in the afternoon, He Yan was sitting outside the martial arts arena to rest. Huang Xiong and a few people came looking for her. He didn’t say anything else, first gave He Yan an ingot of the silver that Shen Han sent over last night, and then asked He Yan where the eighteen immortals had gone.

“I remember you took it away in the end,” Huang Xiong asked, “I went to find a few empty wine jars today. Brothers can each share a little, what do you think?”

“I think it’s very good,” He Yan said, “It’s just that we may have to wait until the next fight for the flag.”

“What do you mean by this?” Wang Ba was a little impatient, and suddenly understood something, and looked at He Yan, “You, you shouldn’t have… drink it all up.”

Facing everyone’s burning gaze, He Yan nodded and said, “I’m sorry. I was careless and drank it all”

“He Yan!” Wang Ba said loudly, “You are too much! That’s our prize. You drank it all by yourself, even the bandits are not as domineering as you!” He rolled up his sleeves and thought of beating He Yan. Halfway through, he remembered that the person in front of him could not be beaten by himself, neither was he able to retract his hand, nor move so it became very embarrassing for a while.

Jiang Jiao and Shi didn’t feel anything. The two of them weren’t greedy or interested in wine, so they didn’t say anything. Although Huang Xiong was not as excited as Wang Ba, his eyes were full of accusations.

If it was on normal days, He Yan would be sorry for her behavior. But the bad news from the past few days has made her a little numb. She was really unable to deal with the thoughts of the few people in front of her, so she just sat there without saying a word.

Seeing her silent and dejected, several people looked at each other. Thinking that he had not been selected for the Forward Battalion this time, was a great blow dealt to He Yan. That’s why he must have used the wine to deal with the sorrows  last night. Yet, he was still so depressed today. But after another thought, his sorrow was really too expensive. Others were only willing to spend a few bucks of rice wine, while he used a few hundred taels of silver, and was still unable to pour his sorrow down. This hatred might cost a lot of money.

Just when a few people didn’t know what to do, someone’s voice broke the silence.

“Brother He… Brother He, so you are here!” Cheng Lisu ran over panting, with beads of sweat on his forehead, as if he had run all the way.

This was the second time He Yan saw him today. But as soon as she saw him, she remembered that she had offended Xiao Jue last night, and felt a headache. He Yan raised her head and asked faintly, “Why are you here?”

“I came to you to discuss something important.” Cheng Lisu looked at the surrounding people, pulled He Yan up and said, “This is not a place to talk, Brother He, come with me.”

He was Xiao Jue’s nephew, so naturally others dared not say anything. Even if it was the matter of the Eighteen Immortals, they could only watch Cheng Li Su pull He Yan away, leaving themselves in the same place staring at each other.

He Yan was dragged by Cheng Lisu all the way for a trot and even ran to the place where Cheng Lisu lived. He Yan didn’t want to go in when they got there. She knew that the next door to Chen Lisu’s place was Xiao Jue. If she went in, it would have been embarrassing if she bumped into him.

Cheng Lisu’s brain was finally smart for once. Seeing He Yan’s face turned awkward, standing still and refusing to move, he said intimately, “Don’t worry, my uncle is out. There is no one here!”

He Yan walked in with him after hearing this.

As soon as he entered, Cheng Lisu looked around, then closed the doors and windows, as if he was about to discuss murder and arson. Seeing him like this, He Yan was speechless for a while.

“You came to me, wasn’t it because you wanted to talk about your uncle again?” He Yan greeted in advance, “Cheng, I am very grateful for your care, but I really don’t want to hear about him these days. Please also leave some face for me.”

As soon as she finished saying this, she felt her shoulder was pressed by someone, and Cheng Lisu turned her around and clutched her hand against her chest.

He Yan almost punched this man subconsciously.

She restrained her urge to hit someone. Although she got along with men a lot, she hadn’t done more than hooking up with the back, this kind of finger interlocking was very awkward.

However, the young boy in front of her had a clear face and was not aware that his actions have caused misunderstanding. However, in his eyes, there were only two men, so there was really nothing awkward.

“Elder brother, please save this little brother!” Cheng Lisu said miserably.

“…What happened to you?” He Yan asked.

“You, first promise me that you’ll help this little brother, otherwise you will never see you little brother again in the future, elder brother!”

“It’s that serious?” He Yan asked, but in her heart she didn’t agree with him. Cheng Lisu has always liked to exaggerate, and could always make small things seem big. And if anything went really wrong, since his uncle is Xiao Jue, so he would naturally help. “You tell me what is going on first, so I can help you figure out a solution.”

“Big brother can you still remember what I said to you, I escaped from marriage. My family wanted to betroth me. I really don’t want to, so I begged uncle to take me to Liangzhou.” Cheng Li Su said this with a sad face, “Now, people in my family still refuse to let me go. The colleague of my old man, who picked a bride for me, has now come to Liangzhou. He has sent a post to my uncle and I to invite my uncle to a banquet. I am just a kid with no official position or fame. So why would my name also be written on the post? Obviously, it is to calculate me. They want to take advantage of my presence so that they can take me away!”

What he said was similar to kidnapping a civilian’s daughter. He almost didn’t go  to the gate of the Magistrates’ Office to beat the drums and complain of grievances.

“Just that,” He Yan said, “If you don’t want to leave, your uncle will naturally protect you. Can they still take you away forcibly in front of your uncle?”

Cheng Lisu can’t really say that Xiao Jue might really watch people take him away. In fact, he might even be happy to get rid of a drag. He coughed slightly and said, “Brother, you also know that my mother was very venomous towards my uncle. If he came forward for me, wouldn’t it be that he would fall into injustice again? My mother would hate him,  I don’t want to cause him trouble!”

Unexpectedly, Cheng Lisu actually wanted to protect his uncle in this way. He Yan sighed in her heart. It seemed that this was the kinship of blood which could not be changed anyway.

“Then what do you want me to do?” she asked, “Let me help you beat an official up? Assaulting an official is a violation of the law.”

“What are you even thinking, brother!” Cheng Lisu let go of her hand, “I am not that rude. I think that Official has never seen me before, and he doesn’t know what I look like. Brother, we are about the same age, equally elegant and handsome, and have similar figures. Why don’t you go to the banquet instead of me? If the Official wants his men to catch me, you can easily escape with your skills. This way, it’s their fault for not catching, and not my uncle’s.”

“I, replace you?” He Yan said, “No way, no way.” She turned around and wanted to leave, feeling a sense of resistance in her heart. She has to become a substitute again. In her previous life, she had been a substitute for He Rufei for a lifetime. And now that she can live by her name in a fair manner, how can she become a substitute for another person?

God, is this you deliberately having trouble with me!

“Big Brother——” Cheng Lisu cried heartbreakingly, “You really can’t just stand here and watch me die! Think about it, you and my uncle, going to a banquet. You’d be next to my uncle, day and night, you can do a better job. Seeing you being so considerate and thoughtful, my uncle will definitely change his opinions about you. Besides, you are standing up for his nephew. In order to thank you, my uncle might… might even let you go to the Nine Banners Battalion!”

He Yan, “…”

Cheng Lisu really didn’t want to go to the banquet, so he was just spouting nonsense. Xiao Jue was not a trader. She might not be able to follow Xiao Jue day and night, but instead can arouse Xiao Jue’s anger. If anything went wrong, she would really be struck off.

Seeing her resolute unwillingness to help, Cheng Lisu collapsed on the ground, pointing a finger to the top of his head, cursing and howling, “God, why are you doing this to me! Yuan Baozhen, what kind of hatred do I have with you in my previous life? Why do you have to push me into the fire pit again and again like this!”

He Yan was about to go out, and had already reached the door. She stopped after hearing the words and looked back, “You just said… Yuan Baozhen?”

“Yes,” Cheng Lisu looked at her, and replied subconsciously, “The Official who arranged my betrothal is Yuan Baozhen, the current supervisory official.”

He Yan’s eyebrows jumped, and after a while, she walked quickly to Cheng Lisu and stretched out a hand to the juvenile who was sitting on the ground.

“Stop howling. Isn’t it just going to the banquet? I’ll help you.”

# Chapter 88: **The Fellowship of the Wicked**

Cheng Lisu couldn’t believe his ears when he heard the promise. It was only after making He Yan to repeat it several times, and swore to heaven that she would help him, did he dare to believe.

He poured a cup of tea and offered it to He Yan with both hands, “Brother, you have really saved this brother’s life! If there is anything I can do for you in the future, even if I must climb the Mountain of the swords or dive into the sea of fire, this little brother will not hesitate to do so!”

He Yan just wanted to speak, but he immediately interrupted, “I know that your wish is to enter the Nine Banners Battalion and build a career. Don’t worry, once this is over, I will definitely be in front of my uncle every day. Even if I had to copy books every day, I will help my eldest brother get this done!”

“…I just wanted to say,” He Yan stopped the child’s ecstasy, “I will go to the banquet for you. Even though I’ve agreed, you still have to convince your uncle.”

Was Xiao Jue someone who would agree so easily? After all, this thing sounded weird.

“Don’t worry about it,” Cheng Lisu said cheerfully, “I have already talked to my uncle and I dared to come to you only after my uncle agreed.”

“Xiao Jue agreed?” He Yan was taken aback.

“Perhaps he felt guilty for not allowing you to enter the Nine Banners Battalion and wanted to give you a chance to express yourself.” Cheng Lisu looked at He Yan sincerely, “So you see, the time and place are right and the people are also in harmony. Big brother, you just have to go to the banquet instead of me. This is all heaven’s arrangements.”

He Yan didn’t have time to pay attention to Cheng Lisu’s nonsense. She was only surprised at the fact that Xiao Jue agreed so easily, which didn’t seem to be like him. Could there be some kind of trap again?

Seeing He Yan’s silence, Cheng Lisu became anxious again, “Brother, You’re not thinking of backing out, right?”

“No.” He Yan said helplessly, “I’m just thinking about how to pretend to be you. After all, I’m different from you.”

“Don’t worry, that Yuan Baozhen has never seen my appearance, so there is no chance of you getting exposed. But I still need to explain to you a little bit so as not to be found out. I like to eat chicken with mushrooms and what I hate the most is terry rice porridge. I don’t like following people. I always get a rash on my face after eating peanuts. I have to take a bath every day, clothes should also be frequent, and incense [perfume] is a must…”

As he said all these one by one, He Yan couldn’t help but only see the extravagant and prosperous life of a rich kid, and shook her head unconsciously.

Cheng Lisu talked about almost the time of burning an incense stick, and after that he felt his throat dry so he picked up the tea hurriedly to moisten his throat, feeling like he came back to life.

“Big brother, do you remember what I just said?”

He Yan, “…remember.” She said, “Is there anything else to explain? Let’s talk about it together.”

“Let me think about it.” Cheng Lisu sat on the chair and looked at He Yan. He Yan was about the same age as him and his appearance was already outstanding amongst the Liangzhou recruits. He was neither clumsy nor robust, instead appeared thin and frail. But this was exactly the same as him, if he was dressed as a young master…

“Almost forgot the important thing!” Cheng Lisu patted his forehead, “You can’t go to the banquet dressing like this. Anyway, I’m also the young master of an Honourable House. How could I dress so shabby? You wait. He ran to the back room while stomping, not knowing what he was trying to fiddle with, but not long after, he came out with baggage.

“Here are some clothes I picked. You take it and wear them. The difference in our figures is not much, you should be able to wear them. Even if you are fake, brother, you have to dress well. I have no other merits except being good-looking like an embroidered pillow. If even this advantage is obliterated, wouldn’t I become useless?”

He Yan was surprised that he could say “embroidered pillow” so righteously and confidently, it was refreshing.

He turned around again and went to the drawer to get a box, filled with something and handed it to He Yan, saying, “Here are some hairpins, fans, jade pendants, and so on. These are enough for the trip. You can’t forget them too “

He Yan, “You are really thoughtful.”

Cheng Lisu scratched his head in embarrassment, “Thank you, thank you.”

He Yan put the baggage and the box away, after that she asked, “Have you really talked about this with your uncle? You’re not lying to me, right?”

“No,” Cheng Lisu said, “If you come here tomorrow morning, you will probably be able to set off.”

“So fast?” He Yan was startled.

“It was originally supposed to be a few days later. Yuan Baozhen hasn’t arrived in Liangzhou yet, but my uncle has to go to the city to find a craftsman to repair his Qin [zither], so he’s going earlier.”

He Yan thought of the zither that she had crushed and stopped making a sound.

Cheng Lisu patted her on the shoulder, “Brother He, it’s all on you this time, thank you!”

…

He Yan returned to the recruit’s general bunk with a bundle of luggage. Wang Ba and the others hadn’t left yet. They were eating the dumplings that He Yan had brought from Cheng Lisu last night. Seeing He Yan came back with something in his hand, Wang Ba said sourly, “Oh, you were gone to receive filial piety again?”

“Did Master Cheng give you something to eat again?” Mak stared at the baggage in He Yan’s hand, his saliva flowed out, “Such a big bag, what delicacy could be there?”

He Yan put the baggage on the table heavily. The baggage was loosely tied, and with a light hit, it opened, revealing the contents inside. It’s not the food that everyone thought it was, but instead some clothes and accessories.

This was unexpected. After a long while, Hong Shan asked hesitantly, “Ahe, what did Mr. Cheng give you clothes for? We are in the military camp, and we can’t wear regular clothes either.”

“Tomorrow, I am going to the city with General Xiao to do things,” He Yan said, “Probably he was afraid that my clothes would be too shabby and I would lose the face of General Xiao, that’s why Master Cheng specially sent me a few clothes to decorate the facade.”

“You and General Xiao?” Huang Xiong looked at him, “This is a good thing. Why don’t you look happy.”

If nothing had happened last night, He Yan would have been very happy too. After all, she could have listened to a lot of news by Xiao Jue’s side. It’s just that after what happened last night, she was afraid that Xiao Jue would become even more displeased with her. Who knows if something goes wrong, she might annoy the second son of the Xiao family again.

Now, she could only first bite the bullet.

“I’m so happy I don’t know what to make of it.” She replied.

The crowd asked her a little more, and after that they finally went all away. At night, He Yan was still thinking about this before she went to sleep.

The reason she agreed to help Cheng Lisu to the banquet, of course, was not because she had a deep brotherhood with Cheng Lisu, nor was she chivalrous to such an extent, but only because she heard the name of Yuan Baozhen.

Yuan Baozhen was a person that He Yan had met before. When she was appointed as General Feihong, He Rufei received the reward for her, and after He Yan recovered her place as the daughter, she had once met this person in the He family. Yuan Baozhen was standing together with He Yuansheng and his son at that time, and she had even greeted him.

Remembering He Rufei’s tone of speaking with him, they must have been very familiar. He Yan thought at the time that He Rufei just “received the reward”. In fact, in the court of Shuojing, he had never gotten close to other colleagues. She didn’t expect him to have close friends so soon.

Now this friend of He Rufei has come to Liangzhou, and happened to have a little relationship with “Cheng Lisu”. If she could take this opportunity to get close and get some news about He Rufei, it might be helpful for her in the future. If she wants to stand out and reach a position where someone would listen to her words, she must make a contribution in the military. But Liangzhou was thousands of miles away from the capital, and also too far away from the He family. A lot of news couldn’t come.

The arrival of Yuan Baozhen in Liangzhou was like giving a sleepy person a pillow. She just didn’t know what Xiao Jue’s intentions were and why he would actually agree with Cheng Lisu’s unbelievable approach. He Yan now couldn’t understand Xiao Jue more and more. She thought he would order her to enter into the Forward Camp, but instead he chose Lei Hou. Now, she thought he would not let her pretend to be Cheng Lisu, but he actually agreed.

There was the sound of Hong Shan snoring nearby. He Yan turned over, closed her eyes. Since she couldn’t think of the result, she just had to follow him personally. This journey is quite long, and there would be enough time to study what Xiao Jue is thinking. Soldiers are always up to block the water and cover the earth. She, He Yan, is also not afraid of anything.

…

Unlike He Yan’s chicness, Shen Han looked surprised in the Liangzhou guardhouse, and after a while, the surprise on his face turned into anxiety.

“General, how can you take He Yan to the city? His identity is still unknown, and he will be by your side. If he makes a move against you…”

“I won’t be threatened by him yet.” Xiao Jue said.

“But…”

The candle flame in the silver lamp on the table was flickered by the wind and almost went out. He tweaked the wick, and the room became bright again.

“If he is one of Xu Jingfu’s person, he might show his feet when he comes to the banquet with me this time. Putting him in the guardhouse would be dangerous. If there is any movement, it would be difficult to handle, so it is better to put him by my side for safety.”

“Besides,” he curled his lips, “He Yan prides himself on his extraordinary skills. This Hongmen banquet can be used as an opportunity.”

Shen Han’s heart was stunned, Xiao Jue was going to use He Yan as a scapegoat.

General Xiao was really the same as before, he didn’t even remember his old feelings, and he didn’t know how He Yan had angered Xiao Jue in the first place. Thinking of this, Shen Han felt a trace of sympathy for He Yan in his heart.

Xiao Jue said, “After I leave tomorrow, you will protect Cheng Lisu and don’t let him run around. The matters of the guardhouse will be left to you for the time being.”

Shen Han put away the reverie in his heart, and said, “Yes!”

 …

Early the next morning, when Mak got up, he found that the bed beside him was empty.

He rubbed his eyes. It was still early, and everyone else in the room was still asleep. On He Yan’s bed, the bedding was neatly folded, and the person has disappeared. Mak wondered, is He Yan already gone? But yesterday, didn’t he say that he would only set off at the hour of the day. It is not time yet.

After a while, everyone got up one after another, only to find that He Yan was missing. Hong Shan said, “This kid shouldn’t have left, right? He didn’t even bid goodbye.”

“Did he leave because he was afraid of waking us up?” Mak tentatively asked.

“Who knows. Shi, have you seen him?” Hong Shan asked.

Shi also shook his head, “No.”

Several people looked at each other, all at a loss. Having said that, they couldn’t just wait for He Yan here. They had to run later. So they got up and washed their faces one after another.

Mak has already put on his clothes, and took the lead to pack up first. He pushed the door and ran out, planning to grab the hot dry breads. Shi and Hongshan were still washing their faces, and suddenly heard Mak shouting outside, “Big Brother, Brother Shan——”

“What’s wrong?” Hong Shan wiped the drops of water on his face. “We are washing our faces.”

“You guys come out and see!” Mak’s voice couldn’t contain his excitement.

Hong Shan glanced at Shi in wonder. Shi said he didn’t know what happened either. He shook off the water in his hand and walked out of the house, saying, “Mak, can you not do this next time…”

 His voice stopped abruptly.

He Yan stood facing him and said with a smile, “Brother Shan, how do I look?”

Hong Shan opened his mouth and didn’t speak for a while. The other recruits in the room also came out one after another at this moment. Seeing He Yan, they all surrounded him and said in a rush.

“Good-looking! Very good-looking, He Yan, you look like a young master of a wealthy family in the capital!”

“It’s not just the young master of the wealthy family. I think it’s not an exaggeration to say he’s from the palace.”

 “Don’t exaggerate. It’s not like you have actually seen someone coming out of the palace.”

“I haven’t seen it before. But I imagined the people who come out of the palace must look like this!”

“These clothes do not look cheap. He Yan, can I wear them too?”

“Bah! Can you wear it out? Don’t think of ruining the clothes and go to the side!”

He Yan was surrounded by everyone and let them look at her. Hongshan and others were standing far away. Mak looked at He Yan with bright eyes, and said, “Brother Ahe is so beautiful!”

“It’s no wonder that people rely on clothes, and horses on saddles. You see, just like the mountains and dews don’t show up every day. With only these little clothes and hairpins, a person can look so different from us.” Hong Shan touched his chin and asked Shi, “Isn’t it?”

Shi nodded, “Yes.”

He Yan allowed them to look enough before she could adjust the bag on her shoulder. She smiled and said, “Before leaving, I wanted to come over to show you. The brothers said I look good, so I don’t have anything left to worry about. I didn’t want to make our Liangzhou lose face.” She waved her hand. “Then, I’m leaving!”

Everyone waved goodbye to her.

On the otherside, Cheng Lisu has also left the house early.

Shen Han was talking to Xiao Jue in the yard, and Green ears [Lu Er] had his head bowed to eat forage next to it. Cheng Lisu went to the stable last night to pick for a long time before picking up a group of beautiful little red horses. He felt these horses looked cute and airy, and they matched him well.

“Why are you picking horses if you’re not going?” Xiao Jue was noncommittal.

 “Although I won’t be going, my eldest brother is going on my behalf. I can’t let people say from behind that the young master aoft Minister’s mansion looks good but is not as good overall. I always talk about exploiting strengths and avoiding weaknesses. Strengths, of course, must be promoted.”

Xiao Jue sneered, “What should I do? With your elder brother’s appearance, it seems that he can’t help but promote your strengths.”

“Uncle, what you said is wrong,” Cheng Lisu looked at him earnestly, “I have seen carefully. My eldest brother, his birth should be considered not bad. Although not comparable to you and me, in Liangzhou Wei, he is outstanding.”

Listening to the chat between the uncle and nephew, Shen Han was speechless for a while and saw someone coming in front of him and said, “He Yan is here!”

The two speaking people looked sideways together, and their eyes suddenly lit up.

In the early morning of autumn, the air was clear as the cool autumn wind blew, refreshing the heart and mind. The sun hasn’t fully emerged, only a small portion appeared, as a ray of golden light fell on the young man, making him exceptionally outstanding.

The boy was wearing a dark red cicada-patterned brocade robe with a belt around his waist. It was obvious that he was too thin and frail, but wearing Cheng Lisu’s clothes, the fragility was completely concealed, leaving only elegance. She was born beautiful, and long hair was tied with a carved wooden hairpin, looking clean and energetic, with a leisurely pace, carrying a baggage, not like some sweaty recruits on the martial arts field instead like a young man off from the capital’s academy even a smile looked poetic.

The young man walked up to a few people and opened the folding fan in his hands with a “pop” sound. The folding fan was floating. Her smile was more eye-catching than the landscape painting on the folding fan, and her voice was deliberately lowered, “Sorry, I’m late.”

Cheng Lisu stared at her with wide eyes. After a long while, he finally came back to his senses. He circled He Yan and said with joy, “Brother, I didn’t expect you to be such a beautiful man, Liangzhou Wei really had such a beautiful man. You have buried your grace! Looking like this, you are almost catching up with me!”

He Yan was pleased with herself, while humbly said, “No, I’m flattered. I’m not good to that extent.”

She went to the riverside early this morning and changed her clothes when there was no one. Cheng Lisu’s clothes were mostly yellow. This boy loved such bright colors so much that He Yan felt a little frivolous wearing them. She finally found a color that was not so ridiculous and picked up a simple hairpin in the box. After examining the riverside for a long time, in order to avoid accidents, she deliberately showed off to Hongshan and the others.

She even got unanimous applause from the new recruits, though it was not such an unpleasant experience. She was used to wearing a mask when she was dressed as a man in her previous life. Now that she can be so free while impersonating as a man, it gave birth to a strange nervousness.

On the other side, Shen Han looked at He Yan and took a breath of cold air in his heart. He was originally wondering that He Yan was just a teenager, even if he had an old relationship with Xiao Jue in the past, why did he fall into Xiao Jue’s eyes? After all, there are countless people admiring Xiao Jue’s stunning beauty, and now seeing He Yan looking like this, he seemed to understand a little bit in his heart. A woman is just a woman. It’s not common for a man to have such an appearance. Besides, this young man has outstanding skills and good temperament. If not for his suspicious identity, in fact… it would not be surprising even if he stood beside General Xiao.

Cheng Lisu was still talking non-stop, He Yan looked at Xiao Jue, but saw Xiao Jue standing in place as his eyes swept over her calmly, with no appreciation at all. So she felt a sense of urgency and walked towards Xiao Jue’s side.

“General,” she folded her fan half open, hiding her face and smiling, like a molester trying to molest a virtuous woman, “how do you think I look?”

The young man looked at her indifferently. After a while, he bent slightly and bowed his head almost to her ear. His voice was a little lower and muffled than the time when he was a teenager. Now he was getting older, so the voice was also matured with a trace of stray magnetism.

“You are actually…”

He Yan seemed to be able to feel the heat exhaled by the other party and had a bashful expression inexplicably. She wanted to listen to him compliment her in such a tone. It was really not something everyone can withstand.

“…shorter than Cheng Lisu.” He finished the rest of the sentence.

He Yan, “…”

He Yan took two steps back and looked at him incredulously. Shouldn’t ordinary people say “You are so eye-catching” or “You are looking stunning”?

Shorter than Cheng Lisu?

The beautiful and jaded young man looked at her as if he hadn’t said enough as he curled his lips and said, “Also, your belt is tied backwards.”

After that, he brushed his body and went forward. He Yan lowered her head to see that Cheng Lisu’s clothes were complicated to style. She had never worn these before, and didn’t know how to tie them. Hearing the reminder at this moment, she hurried to solve it. When Cheng Lisu saw this, he also realized the anomaly and came to help, “Ah, I forgot to tell you that my belt is different from the others, you have to tie it like this…”

He Yan grinded her teeth while looking at Xiao Jue’s back.

It was absolutely impossible for Xiao Jue to let her be Cheng Lisu’s stand-in because he felt guilty about the fight for the flag. He Yan seriously suspected that he brought himself by his side just to facilitate the humiliation and torture.

He was really a natural born enemy.

…

From Liangzhou guardhouse to the city, they rode endlessly, which took about three hours. They started in the morning and it was already afternoon. Apart from He Yan and Xiao Jue, there was also a guard named Fei Nu.

Probably because she was not really Cheng Lisu, so even the carriage was omitted. Riding all the way, not even caring about eating, and by the afternoon, they finally arrived in the city.

The last time He Yan came to Liangzhou city was when she had just come here from Shuojing with the new recruits. But she didn’t stay in the city and went directly to the guardhouse under the Baiyue Mountain. And in the present, she was wearing the clothes of an ordinary young master’s house and came to the bustling market. Unlike Shuojing, Liangzhou had a different style.

The place could be regarded as the eastern part of the country, with four distinct seasons. Although it was not as bustling as the capital, it could be considered as lively. When they arrived in the city, they couldn’t ride the horse as the people were going to and fro, so she walked as she watched, but felt that she didn’t see enough.

But Xiao Jue didn’t come to play in the city. So they went to an inn, which could be regarded as an extremely luxurious one in Liangzhou City, with a total of three floors. The exterior was magnificently made and when they arrived at the entrance of the inn. Xiao Jue got off his horse and then a man helped lead the horse to the stable, as they all walked into the lobby together.

To be honest, in her previous life, although He Yan was the young lady of the He family, she had never stayed in a particularly expensive inn. Xiao Jue was as extravagant as his nephew. Even the place he rests has to be this extravagant. As He Yan thought of this, she heard Xiao Jue say to the innkeeper, “Two rooms.”

“Two rooms?” He Yan was surprised, “Fei Nu and I are going to be in the same room?”

After getting out of the barracks, can’t he let her be alone? Cheng Lisu also told her to take a bath every day. If Fei Nu is going to be in the room, how was she going to wash herself?

“Otherwise?” Xiao Jue stared at her, and asked, “Do you want to share a room with me?”

“No, no,” He Yan said: “Then I’d rather stay with Fei Nu.” It could only be a joke, there was no need for her to be self-aware. After all, as the second son of Xiao, how could he live with someone as crude as her. He Yan was so smug thinking that the second son of Xiao should be put to live with the Bodhisattva in the temple with an incense in front of him to offer fruit, so that he could be worshipped.

Xiao Jue ignored her.

The innkeeper accepted the money and made people clean up the guest rooms. Since the three of them have eaten nothing since morning and the first floor of the inn was used for meals, they decided to eat there before going upstairs.

Probably noticing that Xiao Jue’s identity was either rich or a noble. The innkeeper was standing at their table eagerly, saying, “Our signature dishes here are mung bean noodles, five-flavored steamed gluten, spicy tripe shreds, sesame rolls, eight treasures wild duck, and shredded chicken with cucumbers, spiced pigeons… What would you like?”

Without waiting for Xiao Jue to speak, He Yan first asked loudly, “Boss, is there mushroom chicken?”

“Yes, yes.” The shopkeeper hurriedly replied.

Xiao Jue turned his head and looked at her calmly. He Yan blinked, “What’s wrong, uncle? Don’t you know, my favorite is the mushroom chicken!”

Fei Nu, “…”

You have to be thorough in your acting, was what Cheng Lisu told her. Now that she has entered Liangzhou City, she was no longer He Yan; she was Cheng Lisu, the nephew of the second son of Xiao. Was it wrong for a nephew to want to eat his favorite dish?

There was nothing wrong with it at all!

Xiao Jue retracted his gaze and said, “Give him a plate of chicken with mushrooms.”

How could he be so kind? He Yan’s heart moved. Yes, what if he met someone he knew here? In front of outsiders, Xiao Jue could not deny it. Now, He Yan was being so courageous, as she had been only eating dry breads for so many days in the guardhouse and hadn’t tasted the meat more than a few times. Since an opportunity was here, and Xiao Jue has no shortage of silver, wouldn’t it be a shame if she didn’t kill this fat sheep ruthlessly?

“Uncle!” He Yan yelled crisply and sweetly while saying with a smile, “I also want to eat spicy tripe shreds, sesame rolls, eight-treasure wild duck, shredded chicken with cucumber, steamed gluten with five flavors, five pigeons… What else? Mung Bean Noodles! I want to eat them all!”

Fei Nu moved his lips and then held back what he wanted to say. It’s been a long time since he had seen such a person who was not afraid of death.

The innkeeper was surprised at first, then he smiled and looked at He Yan’s appearance as if he saw a God of Wealth, and said to Xiao Jue, “This little boy really has a vision, he believes in our inn’s dishes!”

“Sorry,” Xiao Jue chuckled lightly, with an elegant gesture, but with a mean tone of sarcasm. He said indifferently, “My nephew has never seen the world, and has made an embarrassment out of himself.”

He Yan, “…”

 “Let’s have one of everything.”

The second young master of the Xiao family spent money like dirt. The innkeeper was overjoyed as he turned around and ordered the kitchen to cook.

He Yan wanted to make fun of him, thinking that it would be good to eat a few of them, but she never thought that Xiao Jue would be so obedient, and he really ordered one portion of each. Was it really possible that Cheng Lisu was so favored by his uncle? It’s like the wind and rain seemed to drive her mad, and she even felt a little jealous.

She approached Xiao Jue and asked cautiously, “General, why are you so nice?”

“What?” Xiao Jue said calmly, “As an uncle, of course I can’t let my nephew go hungry.”

This “uncle” was very meaningful. He Yan pondered, feeling something wrong with the word. She and Xiao Jue were from the same generation anyway. They were both classmates once and later became generals who were equally famous. As a result, in this life, she first became Xiao Jue’s soldier and called him a General. Now, she has simply become Xiao Jue’s nephew, and was even lower in seniority.

This was cheap so Xiao Jue had taken advantage of this!

She remained silent and didn’t plan to call Xiao Jue anymore. Who knew that trying to tease Xiao Jue would make her suffer? It’s really a bad move.

Regardless of how the innkeeper’s dishes were, they were prepared very quickly. After a while, the dishes were ready, filling the entire table. It was so extravagant, that the people next to them were all looking at their table.

He Yan felt a little embarrassed, and said, “General, it must have cost a lot of money.”

“Since you wanted to eat it, of course you should have it.” Xiao Jue said slowly, “But as I taught you before. One will prosper if they are simple and wastefulness will lead to their death.”

He Yan noticed something wrong, and was about to speak, only to hear the person in front of her say, “If there is even a single grain of rice left, you can forget about eating tomorrow.”

He Yan, “…”

# Chapter 89: **Rescue of a Courtesan**

After eating, He Yan leaned on the railing as she went upstairs.

The dishes were naturally delicious, but to eat till not a single grain of rice was left, even if it was a delicacy, was difficult to swallow. After finishing the meal, she was given the permission to eat tomorrow accompanied with a glance by the second young master of Xiao, who lightly ridiculed her saying, “Sure enough, you’re not a human being.”

If he did not say that the food shouldn’t be wasted, would she have made a joke of herself in the full view of the public? The other diners were staring at her and He Yan felt embarrassed.

She was so full that she really didn’t want to talk to Xiao Jue, so she went upstairs with the waiter. Fei Nu didn’t even follow, nor did He Yan bother to care. As soon as she entered the room, she laid down on the bed.

It was really hard to walk.

He Yan’s body felt soft and comfortable and she couldn’t help but roll on the bed thinking it’s good to have money, one can enjoy even outside. Xiao Jue’s room was next door. She pricked her ears against the wall, wanting to hear what Xiao Jue was doing there, but perhaps the wall of the room was too thick as she wasn’t able to hear anything.

While trying to listen, He Yan fell asleep.

After the long journey today, it was hard not to fall asleep upon returning to such a comfortable bed and having plenty of food and drink. When He Yan woke up, the sun had completely set, and the moon had come out. She opened the window, the lantern downstairs was lit and a singer’s singing came from the restaurant not far away.

He Yan rubbed her eyes, drank a glass of water, got up to open the door, walked to Xiao Jue’s room, and knocked on the door.

After a while, someone in the room said, “Come in.”

He Yan walked into the lit room, Fei Nu was standing by the door and Xiao Jue was sitting near the table, reading with a scroll in his hand.

Does this person not feel sleepy? I didn’t see him working so hard in Xianchang Hall, but now he’s working hard. He Yan felt ashamed in her heart, looking at him thinking that this is what people call endlessly learning. She craned her neck to see what Xiao Jue was reading and saw the man close the scroll together and nothing could be seen.

 He raised his eyes, his gaze was very cold. “What’s the matter?”

He Yan said, “General, what are you doing tonight?”

“Not doing anything.”

“Aren’t you going out?”

He said, “What do you want to say?”

“I want to say,” He Yan smiled, “If you have nothing to do, I want to go out and have a stroll. It’s the first time I have come to Liangzhou City. I want to see if there are any interesting things around.” She continued babbling, “If I come across something suitable, I’ll buy something and bring it back to my fiancée.”

Xiao Jue didn’t seem to be interested in her affairs, and said indifferently, “As you wish.”

 He Yan was overjoyed and said, “That’s great. General, I’m leaving now!”

She almost leaped downstairs. After she left, Xiao Jue said, “Fei Nu.”

The guard had long understood and said, “Master, I will follow him.”

“Don’t follow too closely,” he said, “Be careful not to be found.”

“Understood.”

 …

He Yan rushed out the door.

Yuan Baozhen hadn’t yet arrived in Liangzhou so they were staying in an inn for the next few days. They came to the city in advance without telling the magistrate. In addition to repairing the zither, Xiao Jue probably had some other business to deal with. But He Yan didn’t plan to follow. At least for the moment, Xiao Jue had no intention to trust her at all, so why bother sticking onto his hot and cold ass. She didn’t want to read in the inn like Xiao Jue. This would remind her of the terrible memories of when she first entered school in Xianchang Hall.

The night was just right, so she took advantage of this time to walk around. Although Yuan Baozhen had not yet arrived in Liangzhou, there was more than one way to find out more about the He family. Wherever there is a tavern or a teahouse, she could just go and boast by saying “I know General Feihong…” leading to countless conversations. It’s not that she was really boasting, but in her most famous years, there were many local storytellers who talked about her every day, referring it as General Feihong’s life book.

Of course, they also talked about General Feng Yun along the way.

At night in Liangzhou City, there were not as many people on the street as there were in Shuojing, but it was not deserted. The roadside vendors were selling local products. As she walked along and watched, having only the one silver coin she got during the fight for the flag.

Although Xiao Jue was her “uncle”, he didn’t have the intention to give her money. Fortunately, He Yan was already full at this time and didn’t want to spend money, so she just looked and didn’t buy anything.

A dozen steps behind her, Fei Nu was following closely.

Xiao Jue suspected that He Yan’s identity was different, so when he brought her to Liangzhou City this time, he had to keep an eye on her at any time to see if she secretly contacted Xu Jingfu or his people. Fei Nu followed with dedication, but he was still a little puzzled.

The young man came all the way to watch the fun, as if he had never been out before, and everything was novel to him. He said he wanted to buy some presents for his fiancee, but he didn’t buy any after seeing so many. Or could he be a miser who was even reluctant to give his girl a box of powder. Either that or he must be lying to cover something up.

He Yan turned around a street and walked into an alley. Fei Nu remembered Xiao Jue’s words well, so he dared not go too close to him. When he estimated that He Yan was almost at the end of the alley, he followed him in. He was taken aback as he entered. There were only a few lanterns hanging in the wind in the empty alley. Where did the person disappear to?

Fei Nu’s suddenly felt anxious, so he quickly stepped forward and walked to the end of the alley. At the end of the alley was an avenue with crowds on the left and right, and the young man was nowhere to be seen.

He clenched his hands, thinking not only was he discovered but also lost the person.

Meanwhile, He Yan flung her sleeves and walked forward.

Liangzhou City was not as calm as it seemed, because of the many robbers here at night. She was followed from the time she arrived, even before she set foot on the ground. The other party has been following her all the way, though He Yan believed that she hadn’t offended anyone until now. Most of them just wanted to take advantage of the situation. It’s just that since she was under Cheng Lisu’s identity and Xiao Jue was still in the inn, it was best not to mess around. So she didn’t do anything — didn’t even fight with others — just silently shook away the people behind her.

Without being followed, it was easier to stroll around. But wandering like this was not a solution. He Yan stopped a passer-by on the side of the street and smiled, “This brother, do you know where the biggest tavern in the city is?”

The man looked at her up and down, and saw that He Yan appeared wealthy and was dressed in expensive clothes. So he guessed she must be some family’s young master. His tone became particularly good as he said, “The biggest tavern is the Wanhua Pavilion.”

“Thank you,” He Yan asked again, “How should I get to Wanhua Pavilion?”

“It’s not far. You can walk along this street until you reach the end, and you’ll see a rice store, turn to the left, and you will see it after walking for a while.”

“Thank you, Brother.” He Yan gave him another bow and then walked forward with a smile on his face.

It’s exactly the same as the person just said. It really didn’t take long to walk along the left side of the rice store, and she could hear someone playing a pipa. There were also many well-dressed gentlemen walking towards the other side. Needless to say, it was naturally Wanhua Pavilion.

He Yan also followed the people in.

Before reaching the door, she felt gusts of fragrant breeze coming in. She paused, feeling a little strange. At this time, a red and fragrant wind rushed in front of her for a while, and a snow-white and delicate arm climbed onto her shoulders. The woman’s smile was a bit sultry. “You look new to me. Is this the first time you’ve come to our Wanhua Pavilion?”

He Yan, “…”

Didn’t she ask about the biggest tavern? Can anyone tell her why the Wanhua Pavilion that the man said was actually a brothel!

He Yan said, “I didn’t want to come here.” She tried to pull the girl’s hand down, but when the girl heard the words, not only was she not angry, but pressed herself on her even tighter. He Yan’s arm touched a soft ball, and she suddenly became embarrassed.

 Even though they were both women, this was too intimate!

The girl in red hugged He Yan and walked in, saying, “Now that you are already here, you should just come in and take a look. Our Wanhua Pavilion is fun.”

The other party was a woman, and couldn’t be dealt with the same way she does with men. He Yan had no choice but to say, “Girl, I have no silver, I am very poor.”

The woman glanced at her dress from head to toe, giggled, and said, “The son is really good at joking. You don’t need to be so stingy. Even if you’re stingy, it will be fine. Yun Yan invites the son to drink today without charging any silver. Is it okay?”

The perfume on her body was heavy and pungent, making He Yan dizzy. Just when she wasn’t paying attention, she was dragged into the Wanhua Pavilion by this woman named Yun Yan. As soon as she entered, she felt a warm and fragrant breeze. There were a lot of beautiful women on the stage, wearing thin clothes, playing the zither and singing. A crowd of gentlemen was sitting under the stage, applauding, throwing money, and drinking.

There were people everywhere, and He Yan hadn’t seen such a scene for a long time. She stopped for a while, not knowing where to go. When Yun Yan saw this, she covered her mouth and chuckled, and then pulled He Yan’s arm, “This son, let’s go upstairs, there are too many people here, my son is so handsome, I’m afraid someone else will grab you.” she said as she touched He Yan’s face.

He Yan only felt shivers, like a rabbit entering the wolf cave, uncomfortable all over. This Yun Yan was enthusiastic. No matter how He Yan’s expressions have changed, she still pulled He Yan upstairs.

There were several floors in the Wanhua Pavilion. The bottom floor was the long stage, where the girls from the brothel play songs and dance and upstairs was the elegant room, which required more silver as it was used to entertain the distinguished guests. Further up, was where the girls live.

Yun Yan’s appearance was not outstanding in Wanhua Pavilion, and there were not many benefactors who came to take care of her. It was not so easy to catch a rich young master like He Yan at the door, so she wasn’t willing to let him go so easily. Looking at He Yan, who appeared very handsome. If such a person is seen by other girls, he will inevitably be snatched by others. There were too many monks and less porridge, of course, the only way is to start first and lock him up in her own room.

She kept holding onto He Yan without letting go as He Yan wondered how to get away naturally, and when she walked upstairs, he would never see the benefactor who hugged the girl again.

“There’s no one up here?” He Yan asked.

Yun Yan smiled and said, “It’s not that everyone can enter a girl’s boudoir, son, now you don’t have to behave stingy and innocent.”

The girls were so aggressive and bold, and He Yan didn’t know how to parry. When passing by a room, suddenly, the door of the room opened, and a woman with loose hair rushed out but before he could even reach the door, she was grabbed by her hair and dragged back. Before He Yan could take a closer look, the door slammed shut, almost hitting her nose and knocking her fan into the air.

All this happened so quickly that He Yan was also taken aback for a moment. Yun Yan quickly stepped forward and asked, “Are you okay? Did you get hurt just now?”

He Yan shook her head, bent over to pick up the fan, and turned her head to look at the closed door. Her ears were outstanding, and she heard the cry of a woman faintly inside, followed by the sound of a matron swearing.

“Here…” He Yan stretched out her hand to push the door.

“Master, you can’t!” Yun Yan stopped his movements, “What are you doing?” There was a trace of defensiveness in her eyes.

He Yan thought, and when she raised her eyes again, her eyes were full of curiosity, “Who was inside here? What did they just do?”

It was her first time coming to the brothel, and she didn’t know anything. Yun Yan passed a trace of contempt in her heart, but smiled on her face, and hugged He yan’s arm again, “It’s the new girl in our building, she didn’t understand the rules and accidentally ran into the guest so mother is teaching her.”

“There are still girls in your building who don’t understand the rules?” He Yan said calmly, “I thought they were all as considerate as you are.”

Yun Yan smiled happily, and remarked, “This son can really do some sweet talk. We grew up in the brothel, so if we didn’t understand the rules, we would be getting no food. Naturally, we didn’t dare to run into the guests. But some people are different. They have never been tortured before, and even if they suffer some changes, they still think they are the same arrogant and self-willed young lady. So they inevitably suffer. If they get punished a few more times, they will understand.”

He Yan raised his eyebrows: “It turns out to be from a good family.”

“Young Master,” Yun Yan pretended to be angry, and lightly hammered He Yan’s chest while saying, “Are you looking down on our brothel girl?”

He Yan smiled softly, “How could it be? Compared to wild cats with paws, of course, a well-behaved girl is more attractive.”

 She was born beautiful. Wearing Cheng Lisu’s fancy clothes, she looked like a graceful young man. If she deliberately pretended to be more romantic and suave, she could easily fascinate a large group of beautiful women. Sure enough, Yun Yan was also a little stunned by her smile, and unconsciously said a little more.

“Still, there are some people who like this kind of temperamental wild cat. Don’t look at the people in this room, they don’t understand the rules. The young master of our prefect of Liangzhou has asked for her today. I don’t know where her luck came from.” At this point, she was feeling a little jealous.

“The young master of the Prefect’s house?” He Yan’s heart thumped a thousand times, but in her expression, there were no loopholes. She only looked at her in surprise, “The girl in the room is so impressive, even the young master of the Prefect house comes here?”

“Nothing impressive,” Yun Yan disapproved. “This girl just came to our building, and mother asked her to serve the guests, Young Master Sun. Who knows that she was not good. Not only did she not serve the young master, but also used her hairpins to stab him, causing injuries to Young Master Sun’s arm.”

“Master Sun is the only son of Prefect Sun Zhixian. How can one leave this matter alone? So mother is training her for a few days, and would send her off once she is obedient.”

Yun Yan walked forward and said, “It’s just that this girl is also a spineless girl. It’s been three days and she’s still the same. In Wanhua Pavilion, it’s really been a long time since we saw such a sturdy girl.”

“What can we do?” He Yan shook her fan, worried: “If she can’t train her well, how would you all deal with Master Sun?”

“You do know how to joke. There is no girl in Wanhua Pavilion who cannot be trained well. No matter how stout the girl is, after some drugs, she naturally can’t do anything. I think this girl is just asking for hardship. If she is obedient, after serving the young master and coaxing him well, maybe he will make her his concubine. Now, even if she could get to the bed of Young Master Sun, I am afraid that it would be difficult to get his heart. I don’t know how miserable the end will be.”

As she said, she felt a little sympathetic and also jealous.

“Maybe she will figure it out in the next few days.” He Yan was relieved, “There is no need to worry too much.”

Yun Yan shook her head, “I’m afraid that there is no time. Soon, Master Sun’s people will come to pick her up. Just now they must be putting makeup on her.”

He Yan did not speak.

Yun Yan seemed to have noticed that she had said too much, and she showed the charming smile she had at the beginning and pulled He Yan to a room at the end while pushing her in, “Look, why are we even talking about others? Son, why don’t you come and talk about us.”

This was a woman’s boudoir, not very big, with some rouge gouache on the dressing table, with red curtains hanging on the bed, making people feel spring nights are short-lived.

 She grabbed He Yan’s neck with her hands again.

He Yan got goosebumps, but she still had to act like a gentleman, so she smiled, “There is a beautiful woman in my arms, it naturally feels good, but don’t you think that there is something missing?”

Yun Yan asked, “What is missing?”

“Of course it’s a good wine. You and I hit it off right away. In this situation, we should have a drink together.” She thought about the scene where He Yuanliang played with the maidens in the manor before, and she lightly tapped Yun Yan’s nose, “Didn’t you want to invite me to drink? Or is it possible you were llying to me?”

A handsome young man flirted with her, even if she was from a brothel, she couldn’t help but feel fluttered. Yun Yan stomped and said, “How could I? Wait, I will go get the wine now, tonight… I’ll take a rest with you after getting drunk.”

She winked, twisted her waist, and went out. After He Yan waited for her to leave, she sat down on the chair, and then heaved a sigh of relief. Pretending to be a man and going to the brothel. Whether it was in the past or in the present, this was really killing her. It’s even more terrifying than entering Xianchang Hall to study.

She flicked her sleeve again and rolled out a small ball of paper from the sleeve.

When passing by that room, someone suddenly rushed out and was caught back. In that very short time, a ball of paper was thrown out. She was afraid of being discovered by Yun Yan, so she dropped her fan and covered the paper ball. When bending over to pick up the fan, she also picked up the paper ball.

For the fear of being discovered by Yun Yan, she didn’t dare to take it out until now. The paper ball was crumpled and wrinkled, He Yan unfolded it and looked at it, there were only two words written on it.

Help me.

It was written with eyebrow dye, and was a bit vague. The person who wrote this should be very nervous. Even so, you can see that the small letters written were exceptionally beautiful.

There was a girl locked up in that room.

Although Yun Yan made sound elegant, in the end, it was nothing more than forcing the one to be a prostitute. She was now by Xiao Jue’s side. She shouldn’t care about these things to avoid attracting trouble. But since she knew about it, her heart felt heavy, and it became difficult for her to just stand by and watch.

He Yan put the paper ball away again, stood up, pushed the door and left.

When Yun Yan returned with the wine, the room was already empty. She stayed in the same place for a while, stomped and cursed, “Liar!”

…

The night gradually deepened.

The singing in Wanhua Pavilion became more and more sultry and ambiguous, men and women huddled together, talking and laughing intimately. It was difficult to tell whether it was a how or a delivery of true feelings.

The moon here was not as clear as it was in the guardhouse, probably because there were no mountains and rivers, having less space with a bit more of mist.

In the teahouse opposite Wanhua Pavilion, the young man in a brocade was sitting drinking tea.

Reluctant to use that ingot of silver, He Yan pulled a button off Cheng Lisu’s clothes. This button was also inlaid with gold, and He Yan used this button to buy a cup of tea, the cheapest one.

The owner of the teahouse probably has never seen such a wonderful work in such a beautiful dress, but the owner was pulling out the buttons to pay, her eyes were somewhat unspeakable, and she said, “Brother, you can keep this button for yourself. Well, this cup of tea is free for you, I’ll not charge you.”

He Yan, “…many thanks.” She put the button in without tucking it, thinking about waiting for a while before sewing them back to Cheng Lisu’s dress. Why after a while? Naturally, it was because she had to go out on the streets for these few days. What if she had to drink tea again? After sewing, she might have to pull it out a second time.

If Cheng Lisu knew that He Yan had this idea, he would probably regret lending her the clothes.

The deeper the night, the more lively Wanhua Pavilion was and the more guests coming to the pavilion and the fewer people returning to their homes. Having jade and beauty in arms, naturally one will linger. At this time, someone came out of the Wanhua Pavilion and saw it very clearly.

A carriage stopped in front of Wanhua Pavilion.

Two fat ladies helped a woman out, and the woman had half of her body leaning on one of the ladies, as if drunk. He Yan glanced intently. It didn’t look like the ladies were supporting her, but rather they were dragging her.

She was probably the strong-willed girl Yun Yan said that Young Master Sun fancied.

The girl was put on the carriage, and the carriage drove her away. In addition to the coachman, there were two guards who followed it, like escorts. He Yan spat in her heart, they were really openly treating people as goods.

She put down the teacup in her hand and followed them silently.

There were not many lanterns on the street in Liangzhou City, and the night looked very deep. Several times, He Yan felt that the carriage almost merged with the long night.

The two guards were sitting on the rut of the carriage, talking.

“Today, she’s a lot more obedient, and didn’t even make a sound.”

“After entering Wanhua Pavilion, will there still be any good fruits to eat? This girl is too ignorant of current affairs. If she had been obedient earlier, she wouldn’t need to suffer these tortures.”

“Didn’t she say that she is a lady of a well-known family? It’s not uncommon for her to think like that. But this is just right, if the young master does not like her, after tonight, maybe it will be a bargain for us.”

The two looked at each other, and their laughter was incredibly dirty.

As they were talking, suddenly, the carriage plunged forward, almost knocking them both off their feet, and one of them cursed, “Hey! What’s the matter?” while looking up.

But they saw a man sitting under the low eaves of the carriage. He was dressed in a brocade, with his hair tied, half of his face was covered with a scarf, only a pair of eyes were exposed, it vaguely looked as if he was smiling, but because the night was blurred, nothing could be seen clearly. He was tossing a few stones up and down in his hand, and the reason the carriage stopped right now was precisely because a stone pierced the wheel and the carriage couldn’t move.

“Who are you?” the guard shouted sharply after getting out of the carriage.

“Are you out of your mind?” The man spoke. His voice was low and vague, but he couldn’t hide the arrogance in the words. He pointed to himself, “I’m all dressed up like this, of course, I’m here for robbery.”

Robbery?

In broad daylight, no, okay, it’s dark and windy, but in Liangzhou city, they haven’t heard the word for a long time. The important thing was that there were still people in Liangzhou who dared to rob them?

“I think you are tired of living!” The guard sneered, “Do you know who we are?”

“I know.” The man said lazily, “Prefect Sun’s family.”

 “Knowing that you still dare to…”

“How dare you!” His words were interrupted. The next moment, he saw the man rushing down from the eaves.

At the moment, the time was late, and the road was empty. The coachman was so scared that he had already thrown away the carriage and ran far away. The two guards couldn’t stop there, and the three of them fought together in an instant.

The sound outside seemed to alarm the people in the carriage, and suddenly a rustling came out from inside, someone seemed to be trying to get out, He Yan said loudly, “Stay inside. Don’t move!”

Suddenly, the sound disappeared, and there was no movement. One of the guards suddenly realized, “You are her lover! Wow, what robbery? It turns out that you are in cahoots!”

“Are the brains of Sun family’s people are all made of shit?” He Yan exclaimed, punched him in the face, and threw him to the ground, making him unable to get up for a long time.

The other person rushed over with a knife. Unfortunately, though his strength was enough in front of ordinary people, it was not in front of He Yan. He Yan smiled slightly, and as soon as she grasped his wrist, the man only had time to let out a scream, the knife in his hand fell in response, and He Yan kicked him a few meters away.

Although these two people said they were the guards of Young Master Sun, He Yan really felt they were not powerful at all. Probably it was just a matter of picking up people, so they just randomly sent two people here. Who would have thought that there would be someone so bold and undaunted in the Sun family’s turf?

She bent down and picked up the knife that had just fallen from the ground.

The two guards were beaten and could not fight back. Seeing the masked man approaching step by step, they subconsciously retreated, and one of them said, “Let’s talk. Don’t be impulsive, hero? Hero!”

This was a soft talker, and there was another person who was not even afraid, just doesn’t know if he was stubborn. He looked at He Yan sneered and said, “Smelly brat. HOw courageous of you to dare to touch the people from the Sun family. You should know that tonight you have intercepted people and so it will be your turn tomorrow. You… You have gotten yourself in big trouble!”

He Yan didn’t even look at them, and approached step by step. When both of them turned pale, she slashed at the rope that was connected to the carriage and the horse.

 “Do you think I’ll be afraid?”

After that, she directly stretched out her hand and pulled out the person in the carriage. The woman was drugged, unable to move at all, staring at He Yan with wide eyes.

He Yan helped her on the horse, followed by riding on it, raised the whip, and disappeared into the night very quickly.

# Chapter 90: **My Uncle**

The horse galloped in the silent night. After an unknown period, He Yan took the reins and stopped the horse.

This was an empty market and the vendors had already returned home. The lustful girl was trembling since she got on the carriage. At this moment, the drug’s effects started wearing off, and she regained her ability to speak. Her voice was soft and weak, as she said, “Let go of me.”

He Yan helped her down and sat down in front of a tofu shop.

As she was in a hurry earlier, she didn’t take a good look at the girl’s appearance. Now the faint light of the lantern hanging under the eaves of the tofu shop made it clear that the girl was indeed beautiful. She looked really delicate, soft, white and tender, with exquisite eyebrows, fleshy cheeks, and seemed rather young. She didn’t look too old, at most about the same age as Cheng Lisu.

Such a little girl was dressed up by the people of Wanhua Pavilion in an inappropriate tulle dress with heavy makeup and was shivering in cold.

As soon as she sat down, the girl shrank back and looked at He Yan with a vigilant look, “Who are you?”

He Yan was stunned for a moment, then came back to her senses, thinking that this girl might have confused her as a flower picker. She pulled off her scarf and said with a smile, “Don’t be afraid. I’m here to save you. It’s just that it was inconvenient to show my face, so I covered it with a scarf. I didn’t scare you, did I?”

Under the moonlight, the young man who just removed his scarf had delicate eyebrows with a soft gentle voice, making people gradually let go of their guards.

“How do you know…” She still had some difficulty in speaking, so He Yan took out a paper ball from her sleeve, “I picked up this thing that you threw out. I heard about the business of Wanhua pavilion which forces girls into prostitution so I hid in the teahouse next to Wanhua Pavilion, and followed along with your carriage to save you.”

He Yan looked at the girl, “Are you okay? Did they hurt you?”

Things were okay until she mentioned this. The girl’s eyes flushed, and she stretched out her hand while trembling, her all ten fingers were scary-looking and swollen, making people wonder what they had gone through.

The girls in the brothel, especially the newcomers, even if they didn’t understand the rules, the mother would avoid using any punishments that would scar the body. After all, the girls still had to go out to entertain guests. If their bodies were bruised, the guests would lose their appetites and there would be no profit. Therefore, she came up with this kind of torture method.

He Yan looked a little distressed. Whosoever’s daughter would go through this, her parents would be heartbroken. She softened her voice a bit and asked, “Girl, where is your home? I’ll take you home first.”

“Home?” The girl was stunned for a moment, looked at He Yan, and then replied after a long while, “My home is in Shuojing…”

 “Shuojing?” Now it’s He Yan’s turn to freeze, “Were you kidnapped?”

“Sort of.” The little girl said, “I, I escaped from my marriage. I wanted to go to Yangzhou. But I got headed to the wrong direction and came to Liangzhou instead. I only wanted to stay in Liangzhou for a few days before leaving. I didn’t expect to be seen by Sun Ling.” She bitterly said, “If I return to Shuojing, I will definitely make them pay!” At the end, she almost gritted her teeth.

He Yan, “…”

The little girl looked soft and weak, but was too courageous. Who would dare to escape from Shuojing to Liangzhou? What’s the matter with all the teenagers in the capital nowadays? They seemed to be fleeing from marriages. First Cheng Lisu, and now, this little girl too.

He Yan said, “Are you here alone? Is there anyone you know in Liangzhou?”

 The little girl shook her head.

He Yan was also in trouble. Does she have to take such a big person back to the inn? Xiao Jue might beat her to death. Thereafter, they will be going to Sun Zhixian’s mansion for a banquet in a few days. Furthermore, she had intercepted someone from Sun Zhixian’s son tonight.

The little girl seemed to notice He Yan’s troubles. She sat up with difficulty, but elegantly, bit her lip and said, “You… don’t have to worry about me, I will just hide by myself. You have shown me great kindness. When I return to Shuojing, I will let my parents repay you. Whatever you want, gold, silver jewels, mansion or beauties, it would be fine. What is your name, I will go back…”

“Little girl, you can’t protect yourself now,” He Yan said, “It’s hard to say whether you can get out of Liangzhou City, let alone going back to your home so far away.”

“So what?” The other party avoided her gaze and said with red eyes, “I won’t beg you anyway.”

All the young masters and ladies who came from Shuojing had bad tempers. He Yan thought that being stout was a good thing, but being stubborn was not. If Cheng Lisu was here, he would naturally adapt, even if he entered Wanhua Pavilion, he would save himself from all the tortures.

He Yan pulled her up, “Let’s go?”

“Where to go?”

“Of course, to my place. Girl…” He Yan said helplessly, “I’ve just rescued you. I think Master Sun will soon be searching for you throughout the whole city. Also, you have nowhere to go at this time of night. You would be only caught by him eventually and he will torture you even harder. I worked hard all night not to see this result.”

The little girl had yet to fully regain her strength so she was supported by He Yan onto horse, her voice hesitant, “If you take me home, it will cause you trouble. The Sun family in Liangzhou is like an absolute monarch, you…”

This little girl had a clear heart. He Yan drove the horse and said, “Don’t worry, my family covers the sky in Dawei.”

If there were really no alternative, He Yan would drag Xiao Jie into this. After all, the Second Young Master Xiao is the one covering the sky in Dawei.

He Yan asked, “I forgot to ask you for your name”

 “My name is… Tao Tao,” she said.

Tao Tao? This name sounded familiar as if she had heard it somewhere. He Yan thought about it carefully, but couldn’t remember it. The situation was urgent and it was not the time to fool around. So she thought of waiting until Tao Tao was brought back to the inn, and then after tonight, she will cross-examine everything carefully.

…

He Yan didn’t grow up in Liangzhou City, nor did she know the roads of the city. Fortunately, she was good at remembering the way, so she found the inn where she came from. For fear that people would find Sun Ling’s horse here, she dismounted with Tao Tao far from the inn, patted the horse’s butt in the opposite direction, and watched the horse run into the night.

The second son of Xiao was quite good at choosing the inn. This place was not as lively as the previous Wanhua Pavilion area and looked much quieter. At this moment, it was late at night and there were almost no people. When He Yan helped Tao Tao upstairs, there was no one downstairs in the inn. She opened the door and felt relieved upon finding out that Fei Nu was not inside.

There was water prepared in the room, and He Yan said, “You can wash your face first. I have some clean clothes here so you can change into them. It won’t work if you wear this one on your body, you will catch a cold.” She put the pile of clothes that Cheng Lisu gave her in Tao Tao’s hands, “You pick the ones you like to wear.”

Tao Tao looked at her, blushing, “You go out.”

He Yan then remembered that she was now a man, and said, “Okay, I will go out and guard at the door. You can change with peace of mind.”

After she closed the door, she thought for a while, then slipped outside of Xiao Jue’s room again, attached her ears to the wall to hear if Xiao Jue was there.

The light in the room was already out, so she didn’t know if Xiao Jue was asleep. He Yan whispered, “General, General?”

No one responded. She reached out and knocked gently on the door, but still, no one answered. He Yan stood up straight, hesitated for a moment, and opened the door.

The windows in the room were not closed, and the wind from outside leaked in, looking at the moonlight. The bed was neat and tidy, and there were no traces of anyone having slept on it. Xiao Jue was long gone, and the Yin Qiu Sword he put on the table was also no longer there. This man didn’t leave behind his sword, which meant that he must have gone out.

 He Yan also noticed that there was still the familiar Wanxiang Zither on the small table next to her. He Yan curled her lips, slandering in her heart, saying that he lied that he was here to repair the zither, but in fact, he must be doing something in secret here. Fei Nu was not here either. The master and servant must have gone out to do errands. The fact that they didn’t take her along made it clear that they didn’t trust her.

Although she knew that Xiao Jue didn’t trust her for a long time, and also knew that this was reasonable, He Yan still felt a little uncomfortable in her heart. After all, they were classmates who had known each other for so many years. Yet, he would not tell her when he has to go out to do things! So stingy.

 She exited Xiao Jue’s room again and closed the door for him again.

On the other end, Tao Tao had already changed her clothes, pushed the door open, saw He Yan, bowed her head, and said, “I’m done.”

He Yan pushed her in, “Hush, The wall has ears, come in and talk.”

She lit the lamp in the room and Tao Tao, who had already changed into Cheng Lisu’s clothes, was looking much more delicate. Cheng Lisu’s clothes were mostly bright colored, and the satin-colored robe worn on the little girl made her look more fair and beautiful. Her eyes were still red, and her hair was scattered on her shoulders. She looked like the snow-white bunny that He Yan had seen. At first glance, she was a pampered and well-brought-up girl.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t say this, but your taste in clothes is really terrible.” When the little rabbit said, it was not so cute. Tao Tao frowned and pointed to a carp on the clothes, “It’s so gaudy.”

He Yan, “…”

 What is this young lady, she still has the heart to observe the clothes? Is it true that all the young ladies from Shuo Jing are like this? He Yan wondered that she wasn’t like this before. She coughed lightly and said, “At this moment, there’s no other choice, you have to put off with these clothes for a while”

She handed Cheng Lisu’s box of hairpins over, “Choose one that you don’t think is so gaudy, and tie your hair up. You can’t dress up as a woman right now.”

“Why?” Tao Tao was puzzled.

“Sun Ling should send someone over soon in search of a woman in the city who looks similar to you. We will not be spared either.”

Tao Tao became nervous when she heard this, “What should I do?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll find a way to get rid of them. It’s so late. Have you eaten? You can have some dry food that I brought along on my journey here. Wait until tomorrow. I will let the inn make you something hot to eat. There is still tea. Here, though it’s a little cold. Just make yourself at home.”

Tao Tao touched her stomach, only to feel hungry. She went to pour the tea in the teapot by herself. He Yan sighed when she saw this. This girl is really innocent. After her experiences at the Wanhua Pavilion, she still trusted others so easily. If she didn’t meet her but came across someone else with evil intentions,  with a little coax, anyone could easily administer drugs in her tea and abduct her again.

Even though she left the He family alone back then, she followed the Fuyue Army, so it wasn’t so dangerous. This world is always harder on women.

She thought to herself that this matter was originally intended to be kept secret from Xiao Jue, but since Xiao Jue and Fei Nu are not there, it would not be easy to do so. Originally, she planned that if Sun Ling’s people came to the door and Xiao Jue was there, they wouldn’t be able to enter the room to check. Now that the ‘big Buddha’ is not around, people would probably think she’s lying if she tried to make use of Xiao Jue’s name.

Now, she could only hope that Xiao Jue would come back soon. She had never found herself looking forward to the return of Xiao Jue so much as she was doing now.

Tao Tao casually ate a few mouthfuls of dry bread, drank a cup of tea, and said, “I’m done eating.” This “done eating”, judging from the expression of her wrinkled nose — it wasn’t because she was full, but because she was not satisfied with the taste.

She sat down at the table by herself, tied her hair in the bronze mirror, combed for a moment, turned around and said, “done!”

He Yan also felt a little thirsty at the moment, took a cup and was drinking tea, and almost didn’t spit out the tea. The child’s hair was tied up in a mess as if she had just returned from an escape. She couldn’t help but ask, “Is… is this how you tie your hair?”

“I’ve never combed my hair before in the mansion. The maid did it for me.” The little girl was so aggrieved that she threw the comb away, “I can’t!”

He Yan, “…”

She walked over helplessly, picked up the comb with a good temper, and said, “If you can’t, you can’t. Why are you getting angry, I’ll help you.”

After that, she really held Tao Tao’s long hair in her hand and combed her hair one at a time.

Tao Tao was taken aback. The young boy reflected in the bronze mirror was gentle and handsome. She couldn’t help asking, “You can even do this?”

“After a few attempts, I’ll be able to do it.” He Yan replied with a smile.

She has been the young master of the He family for many years, but no one knew about the change of her status except for the people in the second house of the He family. Therefore, He Yan’s servants and maids had never been too close to her. Even the matter of tying the hair can expose her. So He Yan started to tie her hair from a very young age.

Not just the hair, but anything that might reveal her secret, she has to do it herself. Over time, she also developed a temperament to do everything by herself. Although sometimes she felt envious of those young masters who have grown up in the palm of people’s hand. But on second thought, for example, when encountering things like what happened today, at least she will not be crying for anything. For many things, she could rely on her own strength.

After finishing her hair, He Yan darkened the girl’s face and made her eyebrows thicker. She has long been very comfortable in disguising a woman disguising as a man. After putting on the makeup, Tao Tao looked at herself in the mirror and said in a daze, “Many, many thanks… You are really good at this.”

He Yan shook her hands, “Practice makes perfect. Girl, Tao Tao, turn your back, I have to change clothes.”

…

The night in Liangzhou city was very lively.

Someone actually robbed Young Master Sun’s carriage not far from Sun Zhixian’s mansion. The person in the carriage was Master Sun’s new concubine, and for a while, Liangzhou Prefecture’s government jumped around vowing to catch the culprit.

“Master, Master, that person was clearly her lover!” The guard who had received He Yan’s punch before was kneeling on the ground and shouting injustice, “They were in cahoots, and he deliberately took her away!”

“She’s not from Liangzhou at all. Where did her lover come from?” Sun Ling kicked him over. “idiot!”

Sun Ling was now thirty years old and had accomplished nothing, relying on his Prefect father to live his life, bullying the people in Liangzhou City, as if he was doing no evil. He was born with a rabbit-like head, with a black birthmark on his cheek, which made him even more horrible. There were countless concubines in his house and countless women from good families who have been insulted and discarded by him. The people of Liangzhou dare not speak, allowing this pair of father and son to dominate the city.

Today, he was intercepted by someone near his home. Losing a woman was a small thing, but the embarrassment it caused was big. For Sun Ling, this was a blatant disregard for their Sun Family!

“The city gates are now sealed off.” Another guard said, “The woman was injured and should still be in the city. With door-to-door inspections, we can always find out their whereabouts!”

“Idiot,” Sun Ling scolded again, “When did the people of Liangzhou become so bold to move the ground from the feet of this monarch! Since you said that the man knew that it was the person I wanted, he still dared to do it. Naturally, he must be someone who is not afraid of death. Likely, he is not from Liangzhou.”

“That woman is not from Liangzhou either, they may be in the same group!” The previous guard said again.

“Whether or not they are in a group, he dared to fight against the Sun family. He must be prepared for death! You say it again, what did that person look like?”

“He had his face covered and we couldn’t see what he looked like. He was about seven inches shorter… or a head shorter than me, thin and frail, but was wearing very rich and luxurious clothes. The material of his clothes was not like ordinary goods. “The guard racked his brains. “In short, it should not be a poor man. “

Sun Ling thought for a moment and said, “I see.”

The two guards looked at him together.

“The people in the city continue to block the gates, and the remaining guards follow me to check the inn!”

“Inn? Master, why?”

Sun Ling scolded, “A stupid person would always be stupid, just think about it. Since they are not from Liangzhou, they must be staying in an inn! You said that this person was dressed like rich, so it would be impossible for him to live in a crude inn. Isn’t it?”

 “So that’s how it is,” the two guards quickly praised, “Master is wise, Master is wise!”

“Humph,” Sun Ling smiled triumphantly. The birthmark on his cheek looked even more ugly. He surveyed and said, “In Liangzhou city, I have never seen such a person who is not afraid of death. I would like to see who is so bold. And that slut, she really doesn’t know how to behave, this is already the second time! I’m afraid she doesn’t know how powerful I am.”

 “I’ll not spare any of them!”

 …

The night in the city seemed to be illuminated by torches. It was supposed to be the hour of bedtime, every household was awakened by the sound of horseshoes, as the government officials and the city guards rushed into the civilian’s house and interrogated them.

It stands to reason that this should not be the case, but Sun’s abuse of private power was no longer a day or two. Hearing that Sun Ling’s concubine was taken away, many people secretly rebuked.

“Bah, nonsense, a concubine who came from nowhere, with his looks, I’m afraid he can afford her, she must be some innocent girl who must have been kidnapped, how is this behavior different from robbers? Who dares to rob so openly?”

“But wasn’t the person taken away? That person must be some righteous man who couldn’t stand it and made the move.”

“If he really was a righteous man, I would pray to the Bodhisattva for his safety and health every day, and not be caught by man with the surname Sun!”

“Ah, the world has changed.”

Naturally, these voices did not dare to appear blatantly in front of the officers and soldiers, only whispers sounded after the people had left, and they dispersed into the night very quickly without a trace.

The inns in the city were all caught up tonight. The shopkeeper and the staff, as well as the guests upstairs, were all pulled out for investigation. If someone seems to be from a wealthy family, they were even more carefully cross-examined, and even a fly in the house was searched.

He Yan was sitting by the bed, the lights were out, only a little moonlight came in through the window. It was late at night, and Xiao Jue and Fei Nu hadn’t returned yet. She thought to herself, are these two not coming back? Just like those poor families who can’t afford to support extra children, they took their youngest sons to the crowded streets and lied to the children to buy sweets. In a blink of an eye, they’d disappear, leaving their flesh and blood by the side of the road.

Did Xiao Jue abandon her? Then she is too pitiful! There was only such a small amount of money on her, the rent of the room in the inn has to be settled tomorrow, and she has to eat and go back to the Liangzhou guardhouse too. Is this something that humans can do? If that is really the case, she will sell the zither from his room tomorrow. He Yan thought wildly, whether this person will come back, if not, she and Tao Tao will not have to share a room tonight, and there will be no waste.

As she was thinking, Tao Tao, who was also sitting on the side of the cavern, whispered, “You won’t run away, will you?”

“Huh?” He Yan was surprised.

“They said that Sun Ling is very powerful in Liangzhou and everyone is afraid of the Sun family. I have asked for help from many people before but whenever people heard that it was Sun Ling, no one dared to help.”

Tao Tao said this with an angry expression. She was living in Wanhua Pavilion at the time, and it was not calculated from the beginning. Struggling on the road, following the opportunity to ask for help. She found a lot of people, including those who looked tall and powerful, and some scholars who looked polite, righteous with integrity. There were even old wealthy businessmen who were old enough to be her father and some knights who wandered around with knives on their backs. She tried her best to find people who seemed to be able to rescue her, but when they heard that she was the person whom Sun Ling wanted, they walked away with their tails in grief. Even though she promised great rewards and revealed her identity, no one took care of her.

In the end, Tao Tao herself was desperate. When the note was thrown out, she never thought that there would be a tomorrow. Just thinking about seeing Sun Ling, she would rather die. Who knows, at the very last minute, someone rushed out.

She turned her head to look at the person next to her. The young man tilted her head and didn’t know what he was thinking. It was strange that such a weak and juvenile person would provide her with an inexplicable sense of security. Maybe it was the soft smile on his face or his clear and pure eyes.

Tao Tao believed this man inexplicably, but she was still a little worried. She said, “A strong dragon can’t overpower a local snake…”

“Do you still know this?” He Yan smiled, “Actually, I am also a local snake. I am very powerful.”

Tao Tao saw his relaxed expression and felt relaxed too. She looked at He Yan and couldn’t help asking the last question. She asked, “The Sun family is so domineering, you are not from Liangzhou, so you don’t know what kind of trouble you will be in. People don’t dare to take action in such situations, why would you save me?”

This kid, why does she ask so many questions? He Yan tilted her head and saw the little girl looking at her with red eyes, curious and expectant, she couldn’t help reaching out and touching her head.

“Because you are a woman.” She said silently in her heart, “And I am also a woman.”

 …

The noise surrounded the whole inn.

The night was bright red from the firelight, and everyone in the inn was awakened by the sudden officials, standing at the door and questioning them one by one.

Sun Ling stood at the door, looking at the last room upstairs, and said, “What about that room? Why isn’t it open?”

The shopkeeper tremblingly knocked on the door, “Little boy, little boy?”

After a long while, someone came to open the door sloppily. He was a delicate young man wearing a shirt and said with sleepy eyes, “It’s so late, what’s the matter?”

Before the words were finished, the officers and soldiers barged in and searched. There was also a servant boy in the room, busy putting clothes on the boy, “Master, don’t catch the cold.”

The officers and soldiers went in and searched, but they came out very quickly and shook their heads at Sun Ling.

Sun Ling looked at the boy in front of him. This boy was young and looked respectable. His servant boy was busy putting on boots for him.

“What are you doing?” He Yan frowned, “Not even a greeting.”

“Greeting?” Sun Ling sneered, “What a joke. In the entire Liangzhou City, there’s no place where I, Sun Ling, need to greet anyone.” He looked at He Yan, remembering what the guard had said before, he was about seven feet tall and thin. This boy was just like that.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Cheng Lisu.” He Yan replied.

With a “pop”, the boots in the servant boy’s hands fell to the ground. Everyone followed their gazes. Sun Ling’s expression changed and suddenly said, “You, raise your head.”

He was referring to the servant boy.

He Yan noticed something was wrong, and asked, “What are you doing? In broad daylight, while the world is still bright, are you trying to rob me?”

“Rob you?” Sun Ling stared at him with dark eyes, “Don’t speak too early. The one on the ground, raise your head for this young master!”

The person on the ground did not move, his head lowered. Looking carefully, his hands were trembling a little.

Upon seeing this, Sun Ling’s expression became more and more ferocious, and he took a step forward to pull the servant boy’s hair. The next moment, He Yan stood in front of the servant boy, and held Sun Ling’s arm, “This son, pay attention to your actions and words.”

“The assassin who snatched this young master’s concubine is you, right?” Sun Ling laughed, his birthmark was like a ghost tattoo, “You are dead!” He said, “Come here, get me both of them!”

“Catch me?” He Yan smiled, and she said, “I advise you to think twice. Do you know who my uncle is?”

Sun Ling asked, “Who is your uncle?”

“My uncle is the present-day His Majesty’s personally proclaimed General Fengyun, and now the chief of Right army, the second son of Xiao. Master Sun, are you sure you want to catch me?” He Yan raised an eyebrow.

Sun Ling was taken aback and burst into laughter a moment later. Tears of his laughter were about to come out. He pointed to He Yan and asked people around him, “Have you heard that, who did he say his uncle is?”

Everyone around laughed.

“Smelly boy,” Sun Ling stopped laughing and stared at He Yan fiercely: “Since your uncle is Xiao Jue, let him come out! What Xiao Jue? I’ll make you beg for your life and death in front of your uncle today!”

“Is that so?”

An unfamiliar voice sounded from behind him.

Sun Ling looked back and saw that the young man, who was as bright as the moon, followed the guard slowly, with a low voice and a cold mockery.

“You might as well give it a try.”