

Chapter 68

Between Gods and Demons

Ah Fei rose up and walked towards the door.

PENG, the door was shut and one could hear the lock slip into place.

Ah Fei pounded with all his might.

After a while, a voice from inside asked, "Who is it?"

"Me." Ah Fei responded.

"Who are you?" the voice asked.

"I am me."

A giggle came from inside and said, "This person is insane."

"From his tone of voice, he sounds like he's the owner of this place."

"But who recognizes him?"

"Who knows what kind of person he is? He looks like he's just seen a ghost."

Those voices sounded very familiar. Just last night, the same voices kept speaking sweet and seductive words into his ears. Why were they totally different now?

Ah Fei suddenly felt a gush of anger sweep through him. In a fit of rage he rammed the door open.

Seven pairs of beautiful eyes were staring straight at him.

When he spent the night here, those seven pairs of eyes looked as soft as water and as sweet as honey.

But now, that sweetness had evaporated into smoke, and that water had frozen into ice.

Ah Fei stumbled in and snatched a jug of wine. It was empty.

"Where's the wine?"

"There isn't any!"

"Go fetch some!"

"Why should we? This isn't a winery."

Ah Fei staggered towards her, stared at her collar and shouted, "All of you really don't recognize me?"

One pair of beautiful yet cold looking eyes looked at him and said, "And you recognize me? And you know who I am?"

"I really didn't spend the night here?" Ah Fei said.

Another voice answered him, "This is definitely a place where you spend the night. But you are not the same person who spent the night here."

That sweet voice sounded extremely familiar.

Ah Fei's entire body began to tremble again.

He shut his eyes tightly. He did not want to see her. He did not dare to see her.

She was the one who even in his dreams he couldn't forget. He would willingly sacrifice anything and everything, just to see her for an instant.

But now, he would much rather die than cast an eye on her.

She was the same as she had always been.

But he, he was no longer the same person!

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Everyone was still silent, everything was still motionless.

Dust from the ceiling started drifting towards the floor.

Was it being blown by the wind? Or by the frightening aura in the air?

ShangGuan JinHong suddenly took one step forward!

But Li XunHuan remained motionless!

A voice suddenly broke the silence, "To move is not to move, not to move is to move. Do you understand this?"

The voice sounded old and wise. Everyone in the room heard it very clearly.

But no one could see from where it came.

Another voice broke into laughter and said, "If that's the case, then to fight is to not fight, and to not fight is to fight. What's the purpose in fighting at all then?"

That voice was young, lively and sweet.

But no one saw from where it came either.

"The two of them fight because they do not understand the true nature of martial arts." the old voice said.

"You say that the two of them don't understand, but they both believe that they understand very clearly." the voice of the young girl giggled.

After those two sentences were spoken, except for Li XunHuan and ShangGuan JinHong, the look on everyone's face had changed.

Someone actually said that the two of them did not understand martial arts.

If the two of them did not understand, then who in the world could claim that they did?

"They think that 'the weapon is not in hand, but in the heart', that this is the highest level of martial arts. But the truth is that they are off by a lot." the old voice said.

"Off by a lot?" the little voice giggled.

"By at least a hundred and eight thousand li." the old voice replied.

"So what then is the highest level of martial arts?" the young girl asked.

"When the hands are empty and the heart is empty, the weapon and the self become one. If they can comprehend this much, then they won't be off by far." the old man said.

"They won't be off by far? You mean that level isn't the highest either?" the young girl exclaimed.

"Yes, there is still one level higher." the old man said.

"The ultimate level of martial arts is when everything arises from nothing. There is no weapon and no self. Weapon and self are both forgotten. This is true formlessness, this is true omnipotence." the old man said explained.

At this point, neither Li XunHuan or ShangGuan JinHong dared to change the look on their faces.

"After hearing your explanation, I suddenly remembered a story." the little girl said.

"Hmm?" the old man replied.

"There is a story in Zen Buddhism, when the head student of the Fifth Patriarch, Shen-Hsiu, recited a verse:

'The body is like the Bodhi Tree,
the mind is like a mirror bright.
Every moment we work to keep it clean,
and let no dust alight.'

This was already an extremely high level of Enlightenment." the young girl said.

"Yes, this is similar to the idea of 'the weapon is not in hand, but in the heart'. Reaching this level is not easy at all." the old man said.

"But the future Six Patriarch Hui Neng answered with an even deeper verse:

'There is no Bodhi tree, nor is there a mirror bright.
There is nothing and nothing will be,
where would the dust alight?'

And thus he became the most revered figure of Zen Buddhism." the little girl said.

"Correct, that really is the highest level of Enlightenment. If one can reach that level, then one is in the company of gods and immortals." the old man said.

"If that is so, then the theories you are teaching me are the same as Zen Buddhism?" she asked.

"In all matters of the world, when one reaches the highest level, the theories are not much different than from everything else." the old man replied.

"So in everything we do, we must strive for 'No object, no self', because only then can we reach the pinnacle of perfection." she said.

"Exactly." the old man said.

"I finally understand now!" the young girl said.

"It is a pity that other people upon reaching the stage of 'no weapon in hand, weapon in heart', become overly ecstatic and conceited. Yet little do they know that that is only the surface of something much deeper." the old man said.

"So when a person at that level already thinks they have reached the peak, then they will never be able to venture further." the little girl said.

"You are entirely correct." the old man said.

At that point, neither Li XunHuan or ShangGuan JinHong dared to break out in cold sweat.

"The venerable Mr. Sun?" ShangGuan JinHong suddenly said.

There was no reply.

"Since Mr. Sun has arrived, why does he not show himself?" ShangGuan JinHong said.

There was still no reply.

The wind blew in from the windows and made the curtains stand straight on their side.

If Li XunHuan and ShangGuan JinHong were to fight, there was not a person in the world who could hinder them.

Yet, the conversation between the old man and the little girl had completely sapped the competitive atmosphere from the room.

Both of them were still facing each other, both were still in the exact same stance as before. But everyone else in the room felt that they could breathe now. The dreadful intensity in the room had dissipated.

The terrifying aura of death had disappeared from the air!

Li XunHuan let out a long sigh and said, "Dragons show their heads but never their tails. Mr. Sun was definitely in our presence."

"Anybody can boast grand theories, the question is whether they can back up their words." ShangGuan JinHong said coldly.

"It is that not easy to even come up with a theory such as that." Li XunHuan said with a laugh.

Before he could finish that sentence, there came a noisy rumbling from the outside.

Four people carrying a coffin walked into the courtyard.

It was a brand new coffin, the paint on its surface looked like it hadn't even dried yet.

The four people carried the coffin all the way into the reception hall.

One of the guards in yellow walked up to them and said, "You people have walked into the wrong place, leave now!"

One of the men carrying the coffin answered, "Is there a master ShangGuan here?"

"What business do you have with master ShangGuan?" the guard said.

"Then we haven't come to the wrong place. This coffin is for master ShangGuan." the man said.

The guard in yellow glared at them menacingly and said, "If you have come looking for trouble, then I think this coffin is better suited for the four of you."

"This coffin is made of precious Nanmu lumber. We aren't worthy of such a coffin." he said.

The guard in yellow's fist was already about to strike one of them in the face.

ShangGuan JinHong suddenly said, "Who ordered you to bring the coffin here?"

Once the guard heard his voice, his hand stopped in mid-air.

The man looked extremely frightened now, and said hesitantly, "It was a master Sung who gave us four silver liangs and ordered us to deliver this coffin to the grand reception hall of the Cloudy Inn. He specifically ordered us to deliver it to master ShangGuan in person."

"Surnamed Sung? What kind of person was he?" ShangGuan JinHong asked.

"A man, he didn't seem too old, nor did he seem very young. He was extremely generous but we didn't catch a glimpse of his face." one of them answered.

"He came to us in the middle of the night yesterday and even blew out the candles first. There was no way for us to see what he looked like." Another one of them added.

ShangGuan JinHong lowered his head in thought and did not question them further.

He already knew that he couldn't get an answer out of them.

"This coffin is quite heavy... it feels like there is someone inside." One of the men exclaimed.

"Open the coffin." ShangGuan JinHong said.

The lid hadn't been nailed shut. It was easily opened.

It was in this moment that the cold look on ShangGuan JinHong's face finally changed.

There was still no expression on his face. Even his eyebrows and lips stayed still.

But the look on his face had definitely changed.

So much so that he looked like a completely different person. Like someone who was wearing a mask.

He did not want anyone to see the expression on his face right now.

There are a lot of people in the world who wore such masks. Normally you could never tell, but in times of urgency, that mask will definitely come on.

Some use it to hide their sadness, some use it to conceal their anger, some use it to force on a false smile, and some to feign an intimidating presence.

And there are some who use it to hide their fear!

What was ShangGuan JinHong's reason?

There really was a dead body inside the coffin!

The dead body was none other than ShangGuan JinHong's only son, ShangGuan Fei!

When ShangGuan Fei was killed, Li XunHuan had witnessed it.

Not only had he seen Jing WuMing kill ShangGuan Fei, he had also seen him bury the corpse.

How did the body end up here?

Who dug up the corpse?

Who sent it here? And for what reason?

Li XunHuan's eyes flashed with movement, he seemed deep in thought.

The mask on ShangGuan JinHong's face seemed to get thicker by the moment. He was silent for a long while before turning to Li XunHuan.

"You have seen this person before?"

"Yes." Li XunHuan replied.

"And what are you thinking now that you see him?" ShangGuan JinHong asked.

The corpse looked like it was thoroughly cleaned. It did not look like it was dug out of the ground at all. It had on a brand new robe, not a speck of dirt could be found, not a drop of blood could be seen.

Except for a single wound.

The wound was on his throat, about seven tenths of the way through.

"I think... that he died a rather painless death." Li XunHuan said.

"You are saying that his death was extremely quick?" ShangGuan JinHong said.

"Death is not painful. It is the agony of waiting for death that is painful. I am certain that he did not have to endure this." Li XunHuan replied.

ShangGuan Fei's face looked like it was at peace, as if he was merely sleeping.

Someone had completely erased the frightened look he had on his face when he was killed.

Although ShangGuan JinHong wore a mask upon his face, that mask could not cover his eyes.

His eyes were burning with rage. They were directed at Li XunHuan.

"The number of people in the world who can kill him that quickly are very few." ShangGuan JinHong said.

"Very few indeed. That number should be no more than five." Li XunHuan replied.

"And you are one of those five." ShangGuan JinHong said.

Li XunHuan nodded his head and said, "Right, I am one of those five. And so are you."

"And why would I kill him?" ShangGuan JinHong said.

"Of course you wouldn't. I just wanted you to understand, that the people who are able to kill him are not necessarily the ones who would want to kill him. And that the people who did kill him, are not necessarily the ones who can kill him." Li XunHuan said.

"There are a lot of things that happen in this world that we just can't control, that we just could never imagine happening." Li XunHuan added.

ShangGuan JinHong had stopped talking now. But his eyes were still set on Li XunHuan.

The look in Li XunHuan's eyes had become soft, it almost appeared to be sympathy. As if he had seen right through ShangGuan JinHong's mask and saw the shock and sadness in his heart.

He had always been the one who terrorized and tormented others.

Now he was the one who was being antagonized, and he knew not from who or where it came.

Blood is thicker than water. Once a son, always a son.

No matter who you are, the shock of losing a child was not a small one.

ShangGuan JinHong looked slightly uneasy. His cold emotionless appearance was gradually fading.

The sympathy in Li XunHuan's eyes was like a sledgehammer, slowly chipping away at ShangGuan Jing Hong's iron mask.

He couldn't bear it any longer and suddenly shouted, "The confrontation between you and I is inevitable."

Li XunHuan nodded in agreement and said, "It is inevitable."

"Today..." ShangGuan JinHong said.