

Chapter 76

A Brilliant Tactic

"ShangGuan JinHong will definitely arrive early the day after tomorrow." Mr. Sun said in a deep tone of voice.

"Why is that?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"Because whoever arrives first has the advantage of being able to choose the best position on this field. There's no way that ShangGuan JinHong will give up this opportunity." Mr. Sun said.

"Why doesn't Li XunHuan just show up even earlier than him then?" Sun XiaoHong asked.

"It could be that he doesn't like competing over who arrives first... or perhaps he has another reason altogether." Mr. Sun said.

Mr. Sun let out a little chuckle and added, "Li TanHua is not your average person. Sometimes even I have trouble figuring out his intentions."

"Well the way I see it, all the terrain here looks pretty much the same. I really can't tell which spot would be the most advantageous." Sun XiaoHong said.

"It's where he is standing at right now." Mr. Sun said.

"What's so special about where he is standing at right now?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"If ShangGuan JinHong were to stand here, Li XunHuan would be directly across from him." Mr. Sun said.

"Mm hmm." Sun XiaoHong nodded.

"The time of the duel is exactly when the sun will set." Mr. Sun said.

"Ahh I understand now. If someone were to stand over there, their back will be to the setting sun so its rays wouldn't affect them at all. However, standing across from that spot would mean that you are facing the sun, and even if you blink once, your opponent will have the perfect chance to attack." Sun XiaoHong said.

"Exactly." Mr. Sun said.

"But why then would ShangGuan JinHong choose to stand at this spot?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"Well only by standing here would he discover the disadvantage of this spot. He would then be able to find another spot to take." Mr. Sun said. "If you look at that forest over there, the evening sun is reflecting off the frozen dew on its leaves. So even by standing there you may be slightly blinded."

By now Li XunHuan walked to another tree that was across from them.

Sun XiaoHong's eyes followed his every move. Suddenly a flash of light blinded her... that tree had the most frost on its leaves and the reflected light from the sun was at its greatest.

"Now do you understand?" Mr. Sun said.

Sun XiaoHong did not say a word. Li XunHuan suddenly darted up the tree, his body shot upwards and he dashed around almost every single branch on the tree.

"Everybody knows about 'Little Li's Flying Dagger, never leaves the hand unless it hits'. But his lightness skill is also incredible, not many people in this world are his match." Mr. Sun exclaimed.

"What is he doing in that tree though?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"He is testing every limb and branch in that tree to see how sturdy it is. There are two reasons for this." Mr. Sun said.

"Two reasons?" Sun XiaoHong asked.

"Firstly, he wants to make sure the tree hadn't been tampered with by ShangGuan JinHong." Mr. Sun said.

"Tampered with?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"When he is facing ShangGuan JinHong, what would happen if the branches suddenly snapped in that tree?" Mr. Sun said.

"If the branches snapped, then of course they'd come crashing down." Sun XiaoHong said.

"Where would they land?" Mr. Sun said.

"Well on the floor." Sun XiaoHong suddenly realized what he meant and continued, "Or in front of his view, or maybe even on top of his head. It would definitely cause a distraction, and even the slightest distraction would give the upper hand to ShangGuan JinHong."

"In addition, if he had no other choice, he could choose to run up the tree. What would happen then is that the tree would turn into their battlefield." Mr. Sun said.

"So he needs to carefully examine and observe every last inch of that tree, just like he's doing with the surrounding area here now." Sun XiaoHong said.

"You finally understand." Mr. Sun said.

"I finally understand, who would have known that there is so much behind preparing for a duel." Sun XiaoHong said.

"No matter what you do, when you reach the highest levels, it will always be this involved and complicated. Even if it is embroidery or cooking." Mr. Sun said.

Mr. Sun glanced over at Li XunHuan and continued, "Although their duel is set for tomorrow, it really started since the first time they met. What was being tested was their attention to detail, patience, and knowledge. Their chances of victory were set during that time, but the victor will only be revealed the day after tomorrow during their duel."

"Yet all that anyone would ever see is what happens in that instant. There is a saying that goes 'A battle between experts is decided by a single move', but who would have known that there was so much preparation and work behind that single move." Sun XiaoHong said.

A sullen look came over the eyes of Mr. Sun. He struck a flint and lit his pipe, with his eyes focused at the flame he said, "A true expert in the martial arts definitely leads a lonely life. People only see them in their glory and success but no one ever sees how much they sacrifice, and because of that no one can ever truly understand them."

Sun XiaoHong lowered her head and fiddled with her sleeves as she said, "But don't they need other people to understand them?"

Li XunHuan tucked in his garments and with a gentle push off his legs he vaulted to the top of the pavilion.

Mr. Sun blew out a puff of smoke and said, "Everyone always sees Li XunHuan as a careless and reckless person, but who has ever seen this meticulous side of him? When it comes to important matters, he really doesn't leave any details out."

Sun XiaoHong sighed and said, "That may be because he has already let go of so much..."

She suddenly lifted up her head and asked, "Since this battle had started a long time ago, in your opinion who is currently winning?"

"I don't think anyone can answer that." Mr. Sun said.

She started to bite down on her lips again.

Whenever her mind was in disarray she would bite her lips, the more in disarray, the harder she bit down.

Right now she was about to bite through her own lips.

"What do you think?" Mr. Sun asked.

"Well... ShangGuan JinHong seems extremely confident in himself." Sun XiaoHong said.

"Correct, this is because in recent years he has succeeded in everything he's ever attempted. Except, the death of his son could be a distraction for him." Mr. Sun said.

"Also there's Jing WuMing, his leaving can also be considered a heavy loss to ShangGuan JinHong." Sun XiaoHong said.

"This is why he immediately sought out Li XunHuan to duel, because he was afraid that his confidence would slowly begin to waver." Mr. Sun said.

Mr. Sun sighed and continued, "That is why this duel affects not only the lives of Li XunHuan and ShangGuan JinHong, but also the well being of the entire martial arts world."

"Are the implications of this battle really that great?" Sun XiaoHong asked.

"Firstly, if ShangGuan JinHong really were to win, then his confidence would soar even higher. His actions would become even more bold and I am afraid by then that there would be no one that could stop him." Mr. Sun said.

Sun XiaoHong's eyes suddenly flickered, "Actually, I think that there is no way that ShangGuan JinHong can win this battle."

"Why is that?" Mr. Sun said.

"Little Li's flying dagger, never released unless it hits! His dagger has never failed before!" Sun XiaoHong said.

"ShangGuan JinHong has never failed before either!" Mr. Sun said with a sigh.

Sun XiaoHong let out a laugh and interrupted him, "Have you forgotten grandpa? ShangGuan JinHong has failed once before."

"Oh?" Mr. Sun said.

"That day, in a pavilion outside of Luoyang, hadn't he already lost to you?" Sun XiaoHong said.

Mr. Sun did not say a word.

"I have never asked for anything from you before, grandpa. But now I want to ask just one favor." Sun XiaoHong said.

"What is it?" Mr. Sun said as he took another puff from his pipe and engulfed himself in a cloud of smoke.

"I want you to make sure that Li XunHuan stays alive at all costs..." Sun XiaoHong said.

She suddenly knelt down in front of her grandpa and said, "Grandpa is the only one in this world who is able to deal with ShangGuan JinHong, and Grandpa is the only one who can save Li XunHuan. Grandpa should know better than anyone that if he were to die, I really wouldn't be able to live on without him."

The cloud of smoke had dispersed.

But a cloud of smoke appears to have remained in Mr. Sun's eyes.

An autumn mist, sullen and gloomy...

But a slowly smile appeared on his face.

His eyes gazed into the distance, he slowly stroked Sun XiaoHong's hair and said, "Out of all my granddaughters, you are the most mischievous one. If you were to die, who would there be to pluck my beard and pull at my hair?"

Sun XiaoHong slowly got up and said, "So you will promise?"

Mr. Sun nodded his head and said, "You were just waiting to hear these words come out of my mouth the whole time weren't you?"

Sun XiaoHong started to blush and replied, "Grandpa should know that as a girl grows up, she can't stay at home. Her heart must turn elsewhere."

Mr. Sun laughed and said, "But your skin is still as thick, whether anyone will want you or not, I can not say."

Sun XiaoHong crawled over to her grandpa's ear and whispered, "I know, but even if he doesn't want me I have ways to make him want me."

Mr. Sun embraced her in his arms as if she was a little girl again and said softly, "You are my favorite granddaughter, but you really are mischievous and way too bold. I was always afraid that you'd never find a family to marry into, but at least you have found someone who you truly like. I can only be happy for you."

"I really am fortunate to have found him, but he is just as fortunate to have found me. In this world, there really aren't many people like me." Sun XiaoHong said giggling.

"I am sure you are one of a kind in this world." Mr. Sun said with a smile.

She sat on her grandpa's lap and felt extremely lighthearted and happy.

Because not only did she have an extremely admirable grandfather, she also had an incredibly praiseworthy person in her heart.

Family, romance, she had both. What else could a girl possibly ask for?

She felt that she was the happiest person in the entire world.

She felt that the future was incredibly bright.

The day was starting to fall to night as darkness swallowed up the bright sun.

But she did not seem to take notice at all.

"Love can blind a person's eyes."

Although this saying is very old-fashioned, the truth behind it will never change.

If Sun XiaoHong could open her eyes right now, she would realize a deep sadness and pain in her grandfather's eyes. Even if others could see that sadness they could never guess from where it came.

Night approaches, a cold wind blows.

It was completely silent except for the sounds of branches and leaves dancing in the wind.

Where was Li XunHuan?

Sun XiaoHong couldn't help but walk out and shout, "What are you doing up there? Why haven't you come down yet?"

There was no response.

Where had Li XunHuan gone to?

Was there really some malicious trap set up on top of the pavilion? Had Li XunHuan already fallen victim to it?

The roof of the pavilion was laid out with red tiles while a golden peak sat at the top.

On top of the peak was a small iron box.

It was a very ordinary iron box, not decorated in any way. There weren't any elaborate mechanisms inside of it that would fire arrows at whoever opened it.

"But what would that iron box be doing atop the pavilion?"

Inside the iron box was a strand of hair.

A long, black strand of hair that did not seem out of the ordinary.

But Li XunHuan had been staring at this strand of hair mindlessly for quite some time. When Sun XiaoHong was shouting out to him, he seemed like he did not even hear her.

What was so out of the ordinary about this strand of hair?

Sun XiaoHong just couldn't figure it out.

No one could really figure it out.

Li XunHuan's expression was very heavy, and there was a hint of red in his eyes.

Sun XiaoHong had never seen him like this before. Even when they were drinking wine, Li XunHuan's eyes were always fresh and clear.

What had caused such an abrupt change in him?

They placed the strand of hair on a stone table inside the pavilion.

Sun XiaoHong couldn't hold it in and asked, "Whose hair is this?"

No one answered. No one could answer.

It looked the same as everyone else's hair in the world.

"A strand of hair that is this long, it must be a woman's." Sun XiaoHong said.

She knew that what she said wasn't entirely accurate, because men could have long hair as well.

Because there is a saying that goes 'One's body is a gift from one's parents and should always be treasured.'

If you were to cut your hair, you'd be considered unfilial towards your parents.

There are always stories about girls dressing up as boys but are discovered as soon as their long hair is exposed.

But these stories can only trick little children... yet strangely enough these stories are still being told today.

Sun XiaoHong stamped her feet and said, "No matter what, it's still just a strand of hair. What is so strange about it?"

"There is." Mr. Sun said.

"There is what?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"There is something strange about it, something very strange." Mr. Sun said.

"What's so strange about it?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"Everything about it is strange." Mr. Sun said. "What would a strand of hair be doing inside an iron box? How did that box wind up on top of the pavilion? Who put it up there? And for what reason?"

Sun XiaoHong froze still.

Mr. Sun sighed and said, "If my guesses are correct, this must be the work of ShangGuan JinHong."

"ShangGuan JinHong? Why would he do such a thing?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"Because he wanted Li XunHuan to see that strand of hair." Mr. Sun said.

"But... but he..." Sun XiaoHong said.

"He had probably guessed that Li XunHuan would come beforehand to inspect the area, and probably guessed that he would search the top of the pavilion, so he purposely placed this iron box there ahead of time." Mr. Sun said.

"But what is the significance behind this particular strand of hair? So what if Li XunHuan sees it? Isn't it kind of silly?" Sun XiaoHong said.

But even as she spoke those words, she felt that there was something wrong, something very wrong.

ShangGuan JinHong was not the type of person who did silly pointless things.

Mr. Sun's eyes were focused on Li XunHuan and asked him, "Do you know who this strand of hair belongs to?"

Li XunHuan was quiet for a long while, he finally sighed and said, "I know."

"But are you totally certain?" Mr. Sun asked.

His tone of voice was sharp and stern, Li XunHuan could only reply saying, "I..."

"You can't be certain, correct?" Mr. Sun said.

He did not wait for Li XunHuan to respond before continuing, "ShangGuan JinHong did this because he wants you to believe that the strand of hair belongs to Lin ShiYin, and that she has fallen into his hands. He wants you to be distracted so that he can have the opportunity to kill you. Why fall for his trick?"

"Right, if Ms. Lin really did fall into his hands, why wouldn't he bring her out here in person to threaten you with?" Sun XiaoHong added.

"Because he can't do such a thing... others can, but he can't." Li XunHuan said.

"Why not?" Sun XiaoHong said.

"Because if anyone found out that he used such petty and lowly methods to beat Li XunHuan, then he would be the laughingstock of the entire world." Li XUnHuan said.

"But he hasn't said a single word, all he has done is let you see a strand of hair." Sun XiaoHong said.

"This is why his tactic is so brilliant." Li XunHuan said.

"This strand of hair could very well not be hers." Sun XiaoHong said.

"Perhaps it could, perhaps it couldn't... no one can be certain." Li XunHuan said.

"Well then why don't you just forget about it and pretend that you never saw that strand of hair. Then his plan would be completely foiled." Sun XiaoHong said.

"But it is too bad that I have already seen it." Li XunHuan said.

"It is because he didn't say a single word that would make you suspicious, and because he guessed that you would be suspicious that he would lay out his plan like this. Even though you are completely aware of his intentions, you still chose to fall into this trap of his." Sun XiaoHong said.

He let out a long sigh, smiled and said, "Why do I always run into these kinds of situations?"