

Nightwatcher

#Chapter 1: Imprisoned - Read Nightwatcher Chapter 1: Imprisoned

1. Imprisoned

Jail, Capital Region of the Great Feng.

Xu Qi'an^[^1] slowly awoke, smelling the damp rotting odour in the air, enough to make a person's stomach churn.

What is with this stink, has Erha^[^2] defecated on the bed again... and by the stench, it might be right by my head...

Xu Qi'an had a pet dog, a husky, thus they gave it the nickname "Erha".

Far away north for a decade, all alone, he'd been lonely for a long time. Thus it was no wonder that he wanted to raise a dog, to comfort himself ... it doesn't seem to be on his body.

Opening his eyes, looking around, Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned.

A wall built of stone, three windows the size of rice bowls; he lay on an ice-cold tattered straw mat, the sun shining onto his chest from the windows, dust thick within its rays.

Where am I?

Lost, he pondered deeply, doubting his very existence. After a while though, he really started to question life.

I... transmigrated...

The memories came back like a raging tide, not giving him a moment to react, forcefully embedding themselves in his mind, crashing around at great speed.

Xu Qi'an, courtesy name Ningyan^[^3], a constable of Changle^[^4] County, in the capital region of the great Feng Dynasty. His monthly salary was two taels of silver and one dan of rice.

His father was a veteran, who died nineteen years ago in the "Mountains and Seas campaign". Afterwards, his mother died of illness... at this point, Xu Qi'an was somewhat comforted.

As everyone knows, those whose parents have died are never simple.

“I never thought that even though I’d reincarnated, I still couldn’t escape the fate of being a police officer.” Xu Qi’an thought, somewhat bitterly.

In his previous life, he was a graduate of police academy, he passed the aptitude tests, and achieved the “golden rice bowl”^[^5].

However, even though he walked the path that his parents set out for him, his heart was never on a job serving the people. He preferred to be boundless and free, to live a life of luxury and passion; he particularly liked a phrase that was written in Li Xianlin’s diary: –

Thus he brashly resigned, and set out in the world of business.

“But why am I in prison?”

Trying hard to digest his new memories, he quickly realised his current situation.

Since he was a child, Xu Qi’an was raised by his uncle^[^6]. Since he practiced martial arts, every year he could eat over a hundred taels of silver worth of food, thus earning his aunt’s contempt. At eighteen, he had reached the height of the *Refining Body* stage, yet had since made no progress. Under pressure from his aunt, he moved away from the Xu manor, to live alone.

Through his uncle, he got a job at the constabulary, and was doing pretty well for himself, but who would’ve known...

Three days ago, his seventh-rank green-robed uncle in the imperial guard was escorting a caravan of taxes to the capital. On their journey happened an accident, and the silver was lost.

A full 150,000 taels of silver.

Both government and people were stunned, His Majesty was in uproar, and personally gave the command for Xu Pingzhi^[^7] to be beheaded, and for three generations of his family to be arrested, the men sent off to the frontiers as hard labour, and the women thrown into the *Jiaofang Si^[^8]*

As Xu Pingzhi’s nephew, he was relieved of his duties, and thrown in Jail.

Two days!

Only two days to go, before he would be sent to the barren frontier, to live out the rest of his life in hard labour.

“What hell for the opening act....” Xu Qi’an felt a chill down his spine, spreading down his back, and to his heart.

This world is ruled by a feudal dynasty, with no concept of human rights, what place would the borderlands be like?

Barren, with a hostile environment; most who are sent there don’t live past ten years. And even more people, due to any number of accidents, illness, die before even reaching their destination.

Xu Qi’an’s hair stood up on end, and he felt a cold dread.

“System?”

After some silence, the quiet jail rang with Xu Qi’an’s tentative voice.

But “System” did not reply.

“System... System father, please, come out!” Xu Qi’an’s voice revealed anxiousness.

Silence.

No system, there’s no system!

This meant that there was no real way to change his current predicament. Two days later, he would be shackled and chained, and sent to the borderlands. With his physique, he shouldn’t die on the way. But this was not exactly a good thing, spending the rest of his life being squeezed for every bit of labour he can do, only to finally die...

Too frightening, just too frightening!

Xu Qi’an’s dreams of an ancient fantasy land after his transmigration burst like a bubble, leaving only anxiety and fear.

“I must think of a way to save myself, I can’t bloody stay here!”

Xu Qi’an paced around in his small, narrow cell, like an ant in a hot pan, like a wild beast that had fallen down a well, desperately thinking of a way out.

I’m at the peak of Refining Body, my body is frighteningly strong... but this world is stiff like steel; I can hardly break out...

Could I rely on family and friends?

The Xu family isn’t particularly large, its people spread across the land. 150,000 taels of silver were stolen, under such circumstances who can plead to them for help?

But under the laws of Feng, I can use merit to atone for crime, and get out of this death sentence!

But I'd have to find back that silver...

Xu Qi'an's eyes suddenly lit up, like a dying man seeing a thread of hope. He was a graduate of police academy, his knowledge and expertise plentiful, deduction and reasoning skills excellent, and he had read countless cases.

Perhaps he could try solve this case, track back the silver, and use merit to atone for crime.

But soon after, the light in his eyes dimmed.

If he wanted to solve the case, he would have to first see the dossier, understanding a blow-by-blow account of its happenings. Only afterwards could he begin to investigate and solve.

But this current moment he was in Jail, with neither heaven or earth responding to him, and due to be sent to the frontier in two days!

No way out!

Xu Qi'an sat down heavily, his eyes listless.

Yesterday, he was at the bar, getting drunk as can be, and today when he woke up, he was in jail. Thinking about it now, he probably transmigrated after dying of alcohol poisoning.

So when God gave him the opportunity to transmigrate, it was not because he wanted him to live again, but rather because he thought Xu Qi'an died too easily?

In ancient times, being sent to the frontier was the sentence just below a death sentence.

Even though he was mercilessly beaten by society in his previous life, at least he lived in a time of peace. You say rebirth is so good; without a thought, he'd steal his parents' savings and buy property. And then return that to his old mother, and break the arms of his speculative-trading loving father, so that he couldn't even hold a leek.

Suddenly, the sound of chains sliding came from the dark corridor - it should be the door opening.

Then, came the sound of footsteps.

A prison guard came, escorting a handsome scholar, the latter a face full of worry. They stopped in front of Xu Qi'an's door.

The guard gave a look to the scholar, "You have until half a stick of incense burns."

The scholar bowed, and after watching the guard leave, he turned to face Xu Qi'an. He wore a pearl-white robe, his black hair tied back with a jade hairpin. His appearance was extremely handsome, with straight, thin eyebrows, eyes like stars, and thin lips.

In Xu Qi'an's mind, a memory of him surfaced.

The second eldest son of the Xu family, Xu Xinnian^[9]. The son of his uncle, and his younger cousin, who would be taking the imperial examination this autumn.

Xu Xinnian looked at his cousin calmly, "I gave the guards that will escort you to the frontier 300 taels of silver, our entire family savings. You can go safely, there won't be any accidents on the road."

"How about you?" Xu Qi'an automatically replied. He remembered, his relationship with his brother was never particularly great.

Because his aunt hated him, no one in his family - save his uncle - particularly cared for Xu Qi'an. At least, his brother and sister^[10] never expressed much closeness towards him.

Apart from this, in his original body's memories, this younger brother was extremely adept at the art of scolding and criticising people.

Impatiently, Xu Xinnan replied "My honours have been abolished, but under the protection of the academy, I won't be sent to the frontier. Look after yourself is all. When you get there, keep a hold of your temper, if you can live one year, live one year."

Xu Xinnian was a student at the widely known White Deer Academy, and was somewhat of a teacher's favourite, and had recently passed his examinations. Thus, after his uncle got into trouble, he was never imprisoned, but simply forbidden from leaving the capital, where he'd been running back and forth for many days.

Xu Qi'an fell silent. He didn't think Xu Xinnian had it any better than him; perhaps in addition to removing his honour, he would be blacklisted, and all his future generations would never be able to take the examination, to never make their place in the world.

Furthermore, two days later, all the women of the Xu family would be sent to the Jiaofang Si, and suffer its mistreatment.

Xu Xinnian was an intellectual, how could he have enough face to continue living in the capital? Perhaps being sent to the frontier was a better option.

Xu Qi'an suddenly had a realisation. He lept forward, hands grabbing the bars: "You want to commit suicide!?"

Uncontrollably, his heart welled up with grief ... I'm not even meant to know him.

Expressionless, Xu Xinnian shook his sleeves, "What does that have to do with you?"

After a pause, his gaze slowly moved down a few inches, not looking directly at his elder brother, and spoke with a soft tone: "Keep on living."

All said and done, he turned to leave.

"Wait!" Xu Qi'an stretched his arm out from between the bars, grabbing his brother's sleeve. Xu Xinnian paused, looking back silently.

"Can you get the dossier? The dossier for the lost tax silver case?"

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[^1]: 许七安

[^2]: 二哈

[^3]: 宁宴

[^4]: 长乐

[^5]: An "Iron Rice Bowl" refers to a stable job that will always guarantee you rice on the table. A gold rice bowl is naturally better than that

[^6]: "second uncle" in original translation

[^7]: 许平志

[^8]: A series of brothels, ran by the imperial Ministry of Rites

[^9]: 许新年

[^10]: Cousins, but for reading reasons "Brother" and "Sister" are better used

2. A Conspiracy of Monsters

Xu Xinnian knitted his brow, "What do you want to do with it?"

I want to solve the case... Xu Qi'an replied deeply, "I want to know how this case happened, so that even if I die, I die knowing why. Otherwise, I'm unwilling to go."

If he directly said that he wanted to solve the case, Xu Xinnian would probably have thought there was something wrong with his head, thus he changed tack. After all, the original Xu Qi'an was an obstinate and stubborn character.

Xu Xinnian hesitated a moment, "I've read the dossier, I can narrate it to you..."

These past days he had been running errands left and right for the Xu family. The case was too big, no one dared to help, and so helpless, Xu Xinnian decided to try to chase back the lost silver, to get them out of this predicament.

Through the Xu family's connections, as well as connections at the academy, along with a few taels of silver, Xu Xinnian was able to bribe a small official, for him to copy down the case dossier for him.

However, he did not have the reasoning and detective experience, and could only give up on it.

Xu Qi'an raised his hand, interrupting, "Write it down. There's no point in narrating."

All the fine details of the case were in the writing, and he must consider it, chew on it. If he were to use some of his attention to listen, then his mind wouldn't be able to calmly ponder and analyse. Xu Qi'an's logic and reasoning capabilities were amongst the best in his past life, outstanding amongst his peers.

In previous times, Xu Xinnian would not have even bothered with him, considering their differences were so great. But now, he agreed to his brother's last request, quietly saying "Wait a moment."

And left with quick steps.

As the sound of footsteps faded in the corridor, Xu Qi'an sat down, leant against the bars, heart perturbed and agitated.

He didn't really have a way out; wanting to solve the case was just that: a want, and his reluctance was real. Considering that this was his only way of saving himself, it's better to have a go, even if it was a last-ditch effort.

In modern criminal investigations, crime-scene investigation, surveillance, and autopsy were the three big components that could not be neglected. In the case of the lost tax silver, no one died, nor was there any surveillance in this era, and he was in prison, thus he could use none of the three major components.

At least the case file would describe the crime scene.

Simultaneously digesting the memories of the original owner of the body, Xu Qi'an forced himself to control all his negative emotions, to only keep a calm mind. Only then could he think clearly, and reason with rigour.

"Whether I live or die, all comes down to this..." he muttered.

A stick of incense's time passed, before Xu Xinnian hurriedly returned, handing over a few sheets of calligraphy paper, the ink on it yet to fully dry.

"Time is up, I have to go." Xu Xinnian hesitated, "Take care."

Xu Qi'an didn't reply, gaze already caught by the words on the paper.

Time was tight, and so the characters were written in cursive. If Xu Qi'an had never done those years of private school, he would have no chance of making out these arcane glyphs.

"Studying is useful huh... the original owner of this body wasn't even literate... they'd be preparing flowers for his grave." Xu Qi'an ridiculed himself.

The case of the tax silver went like this:

Three days earlier, at 6:30 AM, Xu Pingzhi was escorting a shipment of tax silver to the capital. At 8:15, they reached Guangnan street. Just crossing the bridge, suddenly there was a unnatural wind, the horses were frightened, and fled into the river by the street.

Soon after, a terrific thunderous explosion sounded, the river-water was sent over six zhang[^2] tall, a gush of water that reached into the sky.

The people responsible for escorting the silver dove into the river to search for the silver, yet only recovered 1,245 taels, the remaining silver having disappeared...

Apart from a recount of the situation, there were also the statements of witnesses in the area, statements from the soliders that were escorting the shipment.

In all these statements, Xu Qi'an noticed a phrase, written using red cinnabar ink: "Monsters are behind this"!

"Monsters are behind this!?" Xu Qi'an's pupils shrank, his heart sank.

...

Back hall, Capital Region Government Building.

After over three days of business and running around, the three main people responsible for investigating the tax silver case met together in one hall.

Capital region governor Chen Hanguang^[^1] held a white-and-blue porcelain teacup, his expression sombre. He wore a crimson robe, stitched with a mandarin square showing geese flying through clouds, displaying him as a fourth-rank official.

Sighing, he began “Two more days, His Majesty has ordered us to recover the silver before Xu Pingzhi is to be beheaded. My esteemed sir and madam, we must hurry.”

Of the two people that he spoke of, one was a middle-aged man, wearing a black uniform, with a black cape. He had a long nose, high brow, slightly sunken eyes, that were a light brown. Half a bloodline of the Southern Barbarians.

The other was a young woman with a round face, wearing a yellow dress. Her face was like a painting, her skin was creamy white, and she gave off a bright splendour. In her hand she held a stick of sugarcane, and on her waist were tied a small deerskin pouch, and a *bagua* feng-shui plate. Under her skirt hem was a pair of cloud-patterned dainty boots, swinging back and forth.

These two were assistants to the case. The middle-aged man was called Li Yuchun^[^3], from that organisation feared greatly by all the officials of Feng: the Nightwatchers.

These “Nightwatchers” investigate, arrest, and interrogate. They also involve themselves in military matters, espionage and intelligence gathering.

They belong neither to the six ministries, nor the army. Rather, they are the secret police of the royal family, they are the guillotine hanging over the necks of all the many officials.

All officials of Feng know the phrase: “If in the day you do no evil, then in the night fear not the Nightwatchers.”

As to that yellow-dressed young woman, she was from the Sitian Jian^[^4], and one of important status, being one of the disciples of the Sitian Jian’s grandmaster.

Wearing a silver gong sewn to his chest, the middle-aged man looked down beside his feet, at the sugarcane shards spat out by the young woman, and furrowed his brow. With a flick of his wrist, he manipulated the air currents, to sweep those shards into one neat pile.

He gently nodded his head, briefly showing content.

Only then did he turn back to the governor, with a stern face, “This case is shrouded in fog, and is extremely unnatural. Perhaps our approach is wrong.”

“Where do these words come from, Master Li?” governor Chen knitted his brow; up to now, the actors behind the case had in general been solved, being monsters causing havoc, and stealing the silver.

“We don’t have much time left, and what we need to do now is to catch those beasts. There’s no time to think about these things.” he said.

In recent years, the treasury was nearly empty, disasters happening up and down the country, 150,000 taels of silver was equivalent to a normal county’s entire year of revenue.

The emperor’s anger thus could be understood.

I already don’t have money anyway, you now lose me even more, I cannot fucking believe.

Trembling, Governor Chen had taken on the case, the pressure on his shoulders causing him to not enjoy his food, or peacefully sleep.

Li Yuchun shook his head, and didn’t argue back. “Any new developments from Xu Pingzhi?”

Governor Chen shook his head, “Just a martial artist, all he can do is to complain that he was wronged, he doesn’t even know how the silver was lost.”

Calmly, the yellow skirted woman said “I was watching his ‘qi’, he did not lie.”

Both Li Yuchun and governor Chen nodded, moving the conversation away from this person.

Being the main suspect of the case, Xu Pingzhi was the first to undergo investigation, interrogation, background, relations, and wealth questions, nothing was left out. Along with the Sitian Jian’s qi-watching magic, he had long since been cleared of suspicion.

Of course, the tax money was still lost, Xu Pingzhi failed in his job, a death penalty was hard to avoid.

Both Li Yuchun and Governor Chen fell silent, heart heavy.

Only the young woman, whose pressure was lightest, continued chewing her sugarcane, not a care in the world.

At this time, the sound of footsteps reached them. A constabulary runner hurriedly entered, in his right hand a small delicate bamboo tube, in his left a waxed paper bag, in which sat several large meat-stuffed bao buns, hot steam still rising from them.

He handed over the tube first.

The yellow-skirted girl didn’t take it, rather gazing at the buns, stars in her eyes.

Knowingly, the runner switched orders, and the young woman gleefully took the buns and began eating. Only then did she take the bamboo tube, and from within pulled out a piece of paper, and began to read.

“My people say that within twenty li of there, they did not see any monster qi, nor was there any trace on the banks.”

Crack!

The tension in the air finally broke, as Governor Chen angrily smacked the desk, so angry that his face turned a shade of metal grey, “150,000 taels of silver, where could that be taken to? It must have gone ashore, must have gone ashore! It’s been three days, and we can’t even find any trace of them?”

“Despicable, unthinkable, which monsters dare to steal our Great Feng’s tax silver. This official wills their spirits and bodies to be extinguished!”

If the tax silver couldn’t be recovered, he must take the blame, and His Majesty wouldn’t care whether or not he was done an injustice. Since he was sat in this position, then he must take the blame.

Li Yuchun slowly let out a breath of air, and returned again to his earlier train of thought, “Perhaps, our approach to the investigation was wrong, perhaps it wasn’t the monsters who did this.”

Looking at him, governor Chen inhaled deeply, suppressing down his anger, “If it wasn’t them, then why that wind? When the silver fell into the river, how could it have just disappeared into thin air? How could there be an explosion many zhang tall, that shattered both banks?”

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[^1]: 陈汉光

[^2]: 1 zhang is 10 chi, 3 1/3 metres.

[^3]: 李玉春

[^4]: 司天监, “the attendants of heaven”

3. A Xianxia World Still Has Reason

No one could reply.

Li Yuchun said “Why would the monsters steal the silver?”

Thinking for a moment, Governor Chen responded “When monsters act, they never think first, and do whatever they want to do. To try find the reason would just be to cause headache for oneself.”

The yellow-skirted girl, however, had a different opinion, “Isn’t human meat more delicious... mm, wait a bit, let me finish my bun.”

With a few chomps, she stuffed the rest of the two large meat buns into her mouth, her own cheeks in the process looking like *xiaolongbao*s, before swallowing it down with great vigour, and washing that down with some tea. Then, did she continue with the topic at hand, happily talking about human meat:

“Monsters have no apprehensions, silver to them isn’t going to have the same attractiveness than a living human. Even if they did want silver, stealing or robbing anywhere else would be much safer than trying to steal tax silver.”

To steal tax silver, in the capital of Feng, would be too risky a task.

Governor Chen nodded, “You have a point; we cannot exclude the possibility that they were ordered to.”

Li Yuchun narrowed his eyes, “Then who would have ordered these monsters to steal the silver? For what reason? Why *this* specific shipment, why 150,000 taels?”

“We can think of it like this, the person behind all this needs a large sum of cash, but can’t cause too much notice... in essence, they can’t scam and extort with abandon.” Governor Chen carried on, an idea forming in his mind.

“...So they set their eyes on this tax silver?” the yellow-skirted girl replied, pursing her bright red lips.

“The route that tax shipments take are all random, decided last minute by the imperial guard Xu Pingzhi, yet the monsters set out an ambush by the river... in the guard, we may likely have a mole.” Li Yuchun said, shooting a glance at governor Chen, “Shall we go to the Cloud Deer Academy, get the confucianists to perform an interrogation?”

The yellow skirted girl rolled her eyes, “You don’t have faith in our Sitian Jian’s qi-watching magic, do you? I’ve already said, none of the guards that were escorting that shipment knew anything.”

And thus the train of thought was stuck, and the three fell into silence.

The air was all of a sudden quiet.

Li Yuchun lowered his head, carefully reading the case dossier. Governor Chen constantly sighed. The yellow-skirted girl fiddled around with the feng-shui plate tied to

her waist, thinking that she should leave the governorate building before sundown, and go to the palace and get some dinner with the eldest princess.

The palace's cooks were unparalleled in the world!

Compared to the other two, Caiwei^[1], the yellow-skirted girl, held much more of a visiting assistant position, assisting the case, but not directly involved. She didn't have any official positions, and so even if she was technically one of the main people responsible for the case, the responsibility placed on her was comparatively small.

Governor Chen's gaze trembled slightly, and he carefully said, "Currently, the case is progressing slowly, and the time we have left permits not slowness. This really makes one annoyed and frustrated. Master Li, why not... ask for Sir Wei?^[2]"

He received a slanted look back from Li Yuchun, who replied with a cold snort, "You civil officials have your audit, we Nightwatchers also have ours. To tell the truth, this is Sir Wei's test for me."

Governor Chen could only laugh bitterly, "If this case doesn't get solved, the seat I sit on likely won't be mine much further. Both the higher ups and the commoners are looking at us."

The two looked back and forth at each other, the atmosphere sombre.

...

"If it really is monsters behind this, then I have no chance!" Xu Qi'an's face paled, as he felt heaven's deep malice.

*Yaoguai^[3] exist in this world, and have done since ancient times. They and the humans have long hunted each other, eaten each other.

In the Hundred-thousand Mountains of the southern marches, there was a Kingdom of the Monsters, the largest gathering of *yaoguai* race in all the Nine Provinces.

Five hundred years ago, the many countries of the west, under the Buddhist house, waged war against the Monster Kingdom of the south, and fought for a full sixty years, before wiping them off the map.

In the history books, this war was named "the sixty year war of the monsters".

From that point onwards, the fortune of the Monsters waned, slowly declining over the years, and from that point the Buddhist sect's favour rose into the sky, Buddhism was ascendant.

From the knowledge of the latter Xu Qi'an, one could summarise that in this great war, humanity won out.

If the tax silver case was the doing of the monsters, then the only way he could protect himself, protect the Xu family, was to find where the silver had gone.

As a hardy and unyielding martial artist at the peak of Refining Body, Xu Qi'an still thought he had no way to turn the situation around.

In the early autumn, in the cold and humid weather, Xu Qi'an's whole body soaked with cold sweat.

He was scared!

After fully digesting the original Xu Qi'an's memories, he knew that he had zero chance of breaking out, and he knew even more that in this age where the divine right of kings ruled supreme, "human rights" were far too weak.

The power of life and death was completely held in other people's hands.

Before, he would fantasise about transmigrating to an ancient world, plagiarising famous poems and acting cool, but now it was like he had a bucket of ice-cold water poured over his head.

After transmigrating, he still had to face the venomous hand society dealt him.

"No, this is just a theory, this is just a theory of the Capital Police Constabulary. I can't be affected by their ways of thinking. I'll do it myself, analyse myself... there's still a chance, still a chance..."

An intense will to keep on living calmed him down, and his trail of thought became once again clear and rigorous.

"Why would monsters steal the tax silver, is not human meat better tasting... even if they lacked silver, they didn't have to steal tax silver... they say in records that the women of the *yaoguai* were all extreme beauties, with delicate, exquisite bodies... perhaps there are cat-girls and dog-girls..."

Smack! Xu Qi'an smacked himself, "Don't get distracted!"

The most essential part of inference and deduction was to isolate, to sort out all possible leads one by one, and organise them accordingly. Otherwise, it would just become a ball of yarn; only become more messy.

The case of the tax silver had two main points of suspicion:

One: Magical gale!

Two: After falling into the river, the silver exploded!

Apart from martial artists, all other major cultivation paths had the ability to conjure magical gales, thus the first lead could only lead to “Cultivators” being involved, and not anything more detailed than that.

His second uncle, being a martial artist, thus had less and less suspicion, though one couldn’t exclude the fact that he did not conspire with anyone.

The explosion was another suspicious point. In a battle between high-levelled cultivators, explosions were very common, but in this tax-silver case, there was no account of any altercation. Thus, an explosion happening did not make sense.

“Unless there was no choice but an explosion!” Xu Qi’an muttered, “In all the major cultivation paths, what particular cultivation uses explosions to achieve their motives?”

He thought a moment, and after not getting anywhere, in a start realised that he may have just made the same mistake as the capital government investigators.

Their theories were flawed from the start, having taken the most obvious point of suspicion from the case, and theorised that it was the Monsters, and carried on sprinting down this road, without ever considering going back.

There was nothing inherently wrong with this, but the problem lay in that that first conclusion was too hasty.

Though Xu Qi’an absorbed the old owner’s memories, his thoughts and reasoning were still that of a modern man, he still had the experience from his past life. He preferred finding the smallest details and picking at intricacies within a case, and considering those details that were hard to detect. Only then, would he make a conclusion.

“This path at the moment is leading nowhere, so let’s pick a different possibility, to attack the case from somewhere else. I’ll first rule out the possibility that it was monsters causing trouble, and assume that this was a meticulously planned human-orchestrated situation.

“Then, they must have left some sort of telling tale within the case.

“Locard’s exchange principle tells us, in all cases the perpetrator of a crime will bring something into the crime scene and leave with something from it.

“The many types of things can be split into two main groups, though I can’t quite remember, but it should be something like fingerprints, footprints, cart traces, tool marks, et cetera.

“The flaw in the case cannot have come from the two most obvious signs, and must be in the small details in the background somewhere...”

From the description of the events that day, a visualisation of the events of his uncle escorting the shipment of silver began to replay in his mind.

Adrenaline rushed, his brain began to work at top speed. If the signal transfer in his mind could be pictured, it would be like the many carp in a pond, fighting over food, the surface of the water breaking and bubbling.

Replay over replay, deliberation over deliberation.

All the various details of the case began to converge, and his mind was like a high-speed CPU.

As the details began to fall together, the case became clearer and clearer.

Unconsciously, Xu Qi'an felt himself enter some sort of out-of-body state, his soul lightly floating up, out of his body, through the building, out into the sky above the capital.

Time seemed to rewind. A hint of glow was seen in the east, as the sun was just about to rise. Xu Pingzhi led a group of heavily armoured guards, escorting a shipment of tax silver to the Ministry of Revenue.

This was 6:30 AM, they had reached Guangnan street, when suddenly a gust of magical wind rushed past, the horses took fright, and rushed into the river.

Whumph!

The river exploded, droplets scattering all around.

The explosion blast almost seemed to sound within Xu Qi'an's mind, as reflexively he backed off, and exited this state.

He had a gaze that betrayed tiredness, yet his face was full of excitement.

“I've solved it, I've solved it, hahaha, I've solved the case!”

Xu Qi'an laughed crazily, and hit the bars with vigour, “Oi, anyone? Come, someone come!”

The guard on duty was startled, as he came by holding a torch, cursing “Making such a racket, you think your life is too long?” He forcefully beat the bars, trying to scare Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an backed off a step, and released the cell bars, avoiding having his fingers hit, and said solemnly, "I want to see the governor."

"A lowly prisoner, wanting to see the governor... why don't you have a piss and look at yourself in the reflection?" the guard, through anger, was brought to laughter, as he stuck the torch through the bars, to stab at Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an stepped back, dodging the torch.

"You dare to dodge?" the guard grabbed the key on his waist, jeering, "I'll fucking break your legs!"

"I have an important lead for the tax silver case, I want to see the Governor, if the case is delayed, then you're responsible." Xu Qi'an stared at him.

The guard's expression stiffened.

...

In the back hall, after eating her meat buns, she continued munching on her sugarcane, occasionally reaching into her deerskin pouch for a honeyed sweet to eat alongside it.

One side was dismal and bleak, the other not a care in the world.

"His Majesty has ordered that we solve the case within five days, since if we put it off much longer, that silver may never be able to be recovered." Governor Chen paced back and forth within the hall; he couldn't sit down any longer.

"But with this short amount of time, we don't have any way out!"

Solving cases take time.

The Governor hit the table again, before saying "I will personally go and ask after Sir Wei, to give the case to me."

Li Yuchun hesitated, "I'll come with you."

Caiwei gave him a side-eye, before sweetly adding "That might do, if we have our Great Feng's most skilled people lend a hand, you two may not suffer His Majesty's displeasure.

"However, in Sir Wei's mind, you'll lose standing, which is much more serious than His Majesty asking accountability." she laughed, showing two shiny small canines.

Li Yuchun's face darkened.

A black-robed constabulary runner, head lowered, half-jogged in. Bowing, he said “Governor Sir, the jail guard has reported, Xu Pingzhi’s nephew Xu Qi’an has just said that he has an important lead for the tax silver case, and wishes to see you Governor Sir.”

All three of their gazes suddenly became serious.

Xu Qi’an, if I remember correctly, he’s just a person caught up in this, and didn’t really have anything directly to do with the case. After the initial interrogation, we decided that he had nothing to do with the thing.

Governor Chen thought for a moment, “Bring him in.”

Soon after, Xu Qi’an was brought in, wearing prisoner’s clothes, with traces of dried blood on his body. As he walked, the manacles on his hands and feet clanged together.

[^1]: 采薇

[^2]: 魏公

[^3]: The so-called “monsters”

4. It's Time to Show Your True Skill

As soon as he stepped into the hall, he felt three sharp looks directed towards him.

The red-robed one should be the Governor, wild goose stitch, mm, fourth rank.... the uncle with the silver gong on his chest, hss, the Nightwatchers... fuck me, that girl is a looker, far too attractive... is she married?

Glancing again at her chest, Xu Qi’an calmed down a lot.

Governor Chen sat on his tall chair, expressionless, and with a stern voice as if interrogating a criminal, said “Xu Qi’an. Three days ago when you were put into jail, you didn’t say that you had any important leads. You know what consequences there are for hiding the truth.”

Being an experienced official such as himself, even if his heart was bursting with anxiety, he would still keep calm and not ask too hastily about the case.

The fact that I’m in this situation, means that I’ve at least half-succeeded. Xu Qi’an remained calm, replying “Sir, just a moment ago, my younger brother came to find me, I asked him for the dossier.”

First, one must be truthful.

All three present knew about Xu Xinnian, not because he was at all famous, but rather being Xu Pingzhi's oldest direct son, they naturally conducted a thorough investigation of him.

"What does this have to do with your lead?" Chen asked.

"I deduced the truth from the details of the case dossier, Sir."

"Wait," Chen interrupted him, leaning forwards slightly, "From the case dossier?"

This was certainly not what he expected.

"I've solved the case." Xu Qi'an nodded, indicating that it was just as he said.

Forcefully suppressing the urge to call somebody to throw this lowlife back in his cell, Governor Chen replied sternly, "I will hear you out. However, I must remind you, if you dare talk nonsense, two hundred strikes with the cane would be sufficient to see your flesh separated from bone."

"The tax silver case was not caused by monstes, rather it was caused by men."

With one sentence, he stunned the room.

Governor Chen struck the table in anger, shouting "Bullshit! Jailors, take him away, give him two hundred strikes!"

It was monsters that stole the silver, this was a done-and-dusted matter, was the three investigators' common point of agreement. If initially they hoped that Xu Qi'an could enlighten them, well now they were utterly disappointed; nothing but the crazed words of a small dog trying to jump the fence.

The middle aged man's eyes brightened slightly, as he waved away the runners that had just entered, "Sir Chen, please, don't be so hasty."

He turned his gaze on Xu Qi'an, staring at him with burning intensity, "Continue."

This Governor Chen's temper is really something... Xu Qi'an knew that now, he had to perform.

"From the statements of the gatekeepers, my uncle entered the city at 6:30 AM. At 8:15, the silver shipment reached Guangnan street. At this time, a strange wind picked up, the horses took fright and fell into the river."

He tried his best to make his tone of voice neither domineering nor humble, making himself seem more self-assured. This way, his persuasiveness would increase.

Governor Chen nodded, "This is why we deduced that it was Monsters hiding in ambush in the river."

"Not quite!" Xu Qi'an rebutted loudly, "The demon wind was just a distraction, the river explosion was also an explosion. In reality, there's one small detail that you overlooked, one small detail that lays the entire case bare."

Chen urgently asked "What detail?"

Li Yuchun made to listen intently.

The yellow-skirted girl bit on her honey sweet, but did not chew, as she looked with some curiosity at Xu Qi'an with her bright lively eyes. They had looked at the case over and over, so much so that they knew its events like the back of their own hand, yet did not find any flaw in what happened.

"My uncle was escorting 150,000 taels of silver, may I ask, good sirs, how many *jin*^[^1] is 150,000 taels?"

Li Yuchun's face suddenly stiffened, and the yellow-skirted girl tilted her head, not responding for a long time.

Governor Chen unhappily said: "If you have something to say, say it, don't leave things hanging."

Xu Qi'an originally wanted to just give some hints, to allow these important people to figure it out for themselves, however this attempt seemed to have flopped over.

Their mental maths skills are really low huh, you ancient people... Xu Qi'an thus replied "Nine thousand, three hundred, and seventy-five jin."

According to this world's system of weights, one jin was sixteen taels, thus 150,000 taels would be 9,375 jin.

Li Yuchun furrowed his brow, as he seemed to realise something. Caiwei similarly knitted her brows, asking, "What does this mean?"

Her voice was crisp and clear like a bell.

This means that you're a dumb mute!

Xu Qi'an replied, "How long is the distance between the city gate and Guangnan Street?"

Li Yuchun responded “Thirty li.”

“Through how many market streets?”

“Four.”

“How quick do pack horses go?”

“Pack horses...” Li Yuchun’s eyes went wide, as he stood up suddenly. He stared with widened eyes, showing an expression that clearly displayed “So that’s how it is!”

Three days of investigation, of searching for traces of monsters with no luck, this seasoned Nightwatched had thought that he had taken the wrong approach. However, there was not another clear trail of thought in his mind, and so he didn’t really put it to heart.

Governor Chen felt goosebumps; he still did not realise anything wrong. Clearly thinking was not this governor’s strong suit.

He looked over at the yellow-skirted girl, and suddenly felt much better. The latter, miffed, asked “What’s the issue here?”

With some amount of excitement, Li Yuchun responded “The timing, the timing’s off.

“Guangnan street is thirty li from the city walls, at the pace of a pack horse, going through four market streets, if they entered the gate at 6:30, they could not have made it to Guangnan street at 8:15.”

For he had suffered the folly of believing in first impressions, thinking that it was yaoguai who had stolen the silver, but after some prompting by Xu Qi’an, immediately realised this was not the case, and grasped onto the flaw in it all.

“However the silver *did* reach Guangnan Street at 8:15, there were many common people who witnessed the horses rushing into the river; it couldn’t be fake.” Caiwei piped up with a crisp voice.

Nodding, Governor Chen added “And how can this be explained?”

This... Li Yuchun froze for a moment, before unconsciously looking towards Xu Qi’an.

“Because what was being escorted wasn’t even silver.” the latter responded assertively.

“Codswallop!” Chen shouted, “Skipping over whether or not your uncle or the other escorts had eyes, the case dossier clearly says, there were many commoners who witnessed the situation: the horses rushed into the river, the silver falling in with them.”

He shook the dossier, "Is this not true?"

"What one sees may be deceiving... Sir, may I personally answer your doubts?" Xu Qi'an looked at the table, "Lend me a brush."

Chen waved his hand, giving permission.

Xu Qi'an pulled himself and his chains towards the table, prepared the ink, spread out the calligraphy paper, and awkwardly started writing.

"Sir, could you please fulfil this lowly commonor's request, and have these things brought." he said, handing over the sheet of paper.

Governor Chen took it and read over its contents, not making head nor tail of the intent.

"Let me see," Caiwei came over, wanting to take part, reaching out her pale, supple hand to take the paper.

She, too, could not make head nor tail.

"..." The middle-aged man Li Yuchun read the sheet, making an expressionless face, before meticulously pressing flat one corner of the paper, and handing it back to Governor Chen.

[^1]: The Chinese lb-weight, in modern times 0.5kg, but varied throughout history

5. To Solve the Riddle

About fifteen minutes later, two servants brought in the items requested, and placed them in the hall.

The three investigators looked at the instruments brought, before turning their heads to look at Xu Qi'an.

Governor Chen began sternly, "Everything that you wanted is here. I expect a satisfactory conclusion."

His attitude was somewhat changed.

In that fifteen minutes, this fourth rank official racked his brains, and could not but admit, that Xu Qi'an's deductions had merit, however there was still much left that needed to be explained - such as the fact that the silver did indeed fall into the water.

What hidden mysteries lie within, he could not figure out.

Xu Qi'an nodded, squatting down in front of his items. In front of him, was a candle, salt, bowl, and iron wire. What he wanted to do was very simple, merely high school chemistry: extract metallic sodium.

Being in an ancient era, there was basically no way to extract sodium, due to two main points: electricity, and the melting point of sodium chloride.

However in this world, Xu Qi'an knew that there was one class of people that could do the job: the sixth rank of arcanists of the Sitian Jian: the Alchemists!

The Masters of Alchemy were well known by all throughout the Great Feng, their many numerous inventions and creations have long entered common use.

Xu Qi'an wasn't sure if the exploding silver was really metallic sodium or not, but this was not important. What was important was opening a new direction of thought that could explain all the events that had happened.

In solving a case, making bold assumptions and careful deductions were essential. Then, one must prove one's assumptions, and find evidence.

In his previous life, he had gone through a murder case that left a particularly deep impression on him. The investigators worked overnight, finding new approaches and new leads, making many different predictions, and using these as a basis, went out to look for evidence.

Then, it was again back to reasoning and deduction.

There was a chance that the tax silver was not metallic sodium, however it was very much within an alchemist's ability to do such a thing.

And that's all that's needed.

To guide these important people back onto the right path, he had to do this. As long as the path was right, one could follow the trail to its end, and find the real perpetrator behind the crime.

If they were still struggling in the theory that it was yaoguai, then the case would never be solved. Even if it were eventually solved, he would already be sent far far away by the crown.

He dissolved the rough salt in the water, stirring it, before covering the bowl opening with paper, and pouring the salt water into it.

After filtering, he put the bowl on top of the candle to heat, using a bamboo slip to stir it constantly.

Soon after, the saltwater had evaporated, and the crystals that grew within the bowl was purified sodium chloride. In essence, recrystallising salt to remove impurity.

Governor Chen, Li Yuchun, and the extremely beautiful Caiwei stood beside him, looking at his work with full concentration.

Xu Qi'an raised his head, cracking a smile at the yellow-skirted girl, "Madam, you must be a disciple of the Sitian Jian, right?"

He had noticed the feng-shui plate at her waist. This little thing, apart from the Sitian Jian's disciples, no one would ever use.

She "mm"ed affirmation, before saying grinningly, "My teacher is the Grandmaster of the Sitian Jian."

That fine, beautiful oval face, like a shiny round egg, white with not an imperfection.

A disciple of the Sitian Jian... how big her breasts are I guess doesn't matter as much... Xu Qi'an carried on with a kindly tone, "If you wouldn't mind, could you help me melt these crystals."

The melting point of sodium chloride was roughly 800 degrees celsius.

The yellow-skirted girl pursed her lips, "Controlling fire is only an ability that the Masters of Alchemy have. I'm only a Feng-Shui Master.

"However, I have this magical item that my teacher gave me." She suddenly switched tones, and from her waist pulled off her feng-shui plate, and played with it a bit with jade-like fingers, sending qi into the plate. The character for "fire" suddenly lit up.

"Stand back!"

Xu Qi'an immediately retreated, as soon after, a eye-wateringly bright tongue of flame burst from the plate, consuming the bowl.

"Stop!" Xu Qi'an immediately yelled for her to stop, before quickly inserting the two metal wires into the bowl, shouting "Now electricity - no - lightning! Make sure to control the voltage ... um ... this step is rather difficult, maybe we'll fail several times."

She turned her feng-shui plate, and tapped the "lightning" character. The air suddenly cracked with a few bolts of lightning, as they crashed into the metal wires.

Hissss.... the melted sodium chloride underwent a violent chemical reaction.

"Stop!"

Xu Qi'an held his breath, leaning forward to look into the bowl, as a nugget of shiny silver metal lay within, surrounding it some not yet melted crystals, and impurities.

We succeeded first time... the voltage was perfect... Xu Qi'an was pleasantly surprised.

To extract metallic sodium using electrolysis, the voltage must be between 6 to 15 volts. He had already made mental preparation to fail several times.

But he never thought that heaven was smiling on him today, and let him succeed on the first run.

Governor Chen and Li Yuchun couldn't resist any longer, rushing over to look. In the cup, lay a nugget of silvery metal. At first glance, it had some similarity to white silver. Chen's pupils shrank, as he felt a deep shock and disbelief. Li Yuchun forcefully closed his hands into a fist, staring blankly at the silvery metal nugget, as in his mind, there was as if a bolt of lightning had shot through it, and scattered all the mist.

"Good sirs, please look." Xu Qi'an picked up the metallic silver, wrapping it in paper, and weighing it in his hand.

"This is much lighter than silver, however on the outside it looks extremely similar. If a person were to try pass these off as real silver, could they not succeed in his aim? Please, hold it and see."

He gave the metal to Governor Chen. At this time, the shininess of the metallic sodium had faded, and it looked almost identical to silver.

Li Yuchun took it from Governor Chen, weighed it, and with flashing eyes exclaimed "It really is much lighter. Supposing that they were escorting a shipment of this, then everything lines up. Miss Caiwei, try it."

The yellow-skirted Caiwei took the metal from Li Yuchun, and made a similar motion, before staring at Xu Qi'an with a strange look on her face. "You- you're an alchemist?"

No, I'm not, I'm just following the principles of chemistry.

Scholarly minds were after all sharper, as after Governor Chen's surprise faded, he suddenly shook his head, "No, no, even if the silver was swapped with this thing, then what's explaining the explosion? Unless there were yaoguai in the river, why would this fake silver explode?"

Xu Qi'an didn't respond, merely reaching out and taking the metallic sodium, wading over to the desk, and dropping it in the pen-washing cup.

An intense flame shot up, smoke rolling through the air.

Boom!

The metallic sodium reacted violently with the water, as many small cracks formed on the container that held the liquid.

“This- this-” Governor Chen was stunned.

“When this fake silver touches water, it will explode. This can explain why when the silver fell into the water, it exploded with such vigour.” Xu Qi’an explained.

The middle aged man muttered, “From the start, we were misled. The perpetrator behind this used magical wind and the explosion, to make us think it was yaoguai causing this, shifting the investigation to catching these monsters.

“No wonder the qi-seeing magic did not see any trace of them.”

Xu Qi’an added, “After the silver fell into the water, the escorting soliders only recovered just over a thousand taels of silver. If my guess is correct, this silver was all on the outermost layer, to fool people.”

A perfect fit, and a perfect conclusion. All fell into place.

“Xu Qi’an!” the middle-aged man exclaimed approvingly, “good, very good!”

Suddenly he frowned, his gaze fixating on Xu Qi’an’s crooked collar. he made to pat Xu Qi’an’s elbow, simultaneously pulling his collar straight.

Xu Qi’an felt somewhat shocked and flattered, that this man would praise him like so.

With a furrowed brow, Governor Chen piped up, “If the silver was fake, where did the real silver go?”

Hearing this, Caiwei let out a serious look, “From when the silver left the storehouse to entering the capital, it changed hands many times. If we were to find who was responsible, numerous officials would have to be put into jail. The difficulty of recoving the silver now is no less than finding a needle in a haystack. Plus, this is beyond our given scope, we must report to His Majesty.”

Chen nodded, he had the same idea.

Li Yuchun however had a different opinion, “On the path the silver took into the capital, it changed hands many times. If the silver was fake, then it should have been discovered ages ago. The only possibility could be that it was swapped recently.”

Governor Chen’s eyes lit up; this drastically reduced their area of investigation.

“Servants! Prepare the palanquin, quickly, prepare the palanquin, this official must set out.” he hurriedly ran into the inner hall.

The middle aged man swiftly followed.

Xu Qi’an quickly shouted, “Governor Sir! Please, don’t forget your promise to this lowly commoner!”