

Nightwatcher 161

Chapter 161. Buying a House

8:45 AM, Xu Qi'an climbed astride his beloved mare, that never got into traffic jams, and headed towards the Sitianjian. Under the enthusiastic welcome by the white-cloaked arcanists, he found Chu Caiwei listening to Song Qing's lecture.

"Miss Caiwei, I want to buy a city in the inner city. I know the Sitianjian knows how to inspect feng-shui, so I'd like to ask you for help." Xu Qi'an stated his intentions.

Chu Caiwei moved her gaze from the various vials and beakers on the table, raising her face. A girl of just eighteen, her face was still round and tender.

A face both beautiful and delicate, with round eyes flashing brightly, the whites clear and pure, like that of an infant.

As everyone knows, the eyes of an infant are the clearest, purest, brightest, this is because the whites are most pure.

Unlike an adult, as one ages, the whites of one's eyes will become cloudy, filling with blood vessels.

Chu Caiwei's eyes were like that of an infants, big and large and extremely beautiful.[^1]

"I need to learn alchemy, I'm not going." Chu Caiwei puffed her cheeks, and turned her face aside.

Is it that time of the month for her? She seems to be grumpy... Xu Qi'an thought, before hearing Song Qing say, "I'll call a junior brother to go with you."

What do I want a junior brother for? Hell no! Only if the junior sister accompanies me will things be fun, who wants to go window shopping with an old man. Xu Qi'an shook his head, gracefully declining Song Qing's offer, saying:

"Miss Caiwei, may I ask why you're so... shitting up a wall today?"[^2]

Chu Caiwei replied earnestly: "I've been stuck at seventh rank Master of Feng-Shui for over a year. I should have been a Master of Alchemy by now, but alchemy is just too hard, it's both exhausting and boring..."

Yup, I get you, STEM is a woman's nightmare.

Chu Caiwei continued, "Furthermore, to become a sixth rank Master of Alchemy, I need to independently complete a completely new method of alchemy, and then spread it far and wide. Only when I get the common people's positive feedback can I then advance."

The last sentence, Xu Qi'an did not understand: "The common people's positive feedback?"

"Do you know who discovered gunpowder?"

"How would I know?"

“Gunpowder was discovered three hundred years ago by a Master of Feng-Shui of the Sitianjian. He spread gunpowder widely, and received the common people’s approval, thus advancing to Master of Alchemy. Of course, you needn’t necessarily invent something so mind-boggling; senior brother Song Qing invented ceramic glaze and advanced that way.” Chu Caiwei said, “the crucial part is the reaction of the common people.”

So the son of a bitch who had ruined my chance at fortune was you Song Qing... Xu Qi’an secretly seethed, then asking in confusion: “Why do you need to get the approval of the common people?”

Chu Caiwei immediately looked towards Song Qing, as the latter hesitated, saying “This is the Sitianjian’s secret. There’s no harm in telling you, but don’t go around telling anyone else.”

Seeing Xu Qi’an nod, Song Qing said, “Have you ever felt that the Sitianjian was different from other cultivation pathways?”

“Serving the country and people, making selfless contributions, extremely noble.” Xu Qi’an said seriously.

Xu Qi’an is worthy of being a friend of the Sitianjian... Song Qing nodded in approval, his voice becoming excited, “Yes, you have a very original and accurate gaze, I admire you.

“In all the great systems, rank nine is the foundation. In reality the differences in the ninth rank represents the core of each system. The martial artists’ Refining Vitality, the Confucianists’ Awakened, the Buddhists’ Sramanera.”

The martial artists have Refining Vitality, its core is the body, the body is the foundation of martial arts... the Confucianists have Awakened, as in becoming literate, uh, does this imply, that if you don’t have a brain don’t read books? The Buddhists have Sramanera, acolyte. The young acolytes must hold their vows, to keep vows is the foundation upon which the monks learn Buddhist scripture... then what about the ninth rank of the arcanists, Physician? There doesn’t seem to be much a Physician has to do with Arcanists?

Xu Qi’an fell into silence. Song Qing, seeing that he had not yet had the realisation, prodded him: “The essence of a ninth rank Physician is not in the pharmacy, but in the people. The path of the Arcanist is the path of man, thus the sixth rank Masters of Alchemy must receive the approval of the common people, thus the Sitianjian must be attached to the royal court.”

The path of the Arcanist is the path of man? That shouldn’t be the “humanitarianism”^[^3] that I know about... no wonder these white-cloaks are so proud and uppity yet they work “to serve the people”^[^4]; no wonder the Jianzheng is the protector of the capital, they have to support the crown... It reminds me of the Confucianists who also have to support the crown. The Confucianists until today have not had a second rank, going off Xinnian’s words, they may have had their path broken. Is this not quite similar to the seventh rank Masters of Feng Shui — if they don’t receive the approval of the common people, they will never gain rank?

If there is the way of man, then there are bound to be other ways, “Dao”’s existing. Apart from the surface level system differences, there are different Daos hidden behind them?

“Do you have any ideas for a new alchemical invention?” Xu Qi’an asked.

Song Qing glanced at his junior sister, and said helplessly, “Notwithstanding that she’s not the sharpest sword, she also doesn’t like studying. I’m afraid it’s difficult.”

The few other white-cloaked arcanists all shook their heads, displaying pessimistic outlooks towards Chu Caiwei’s advancement.

“With sister Caiwei... we’ll just have to wait for an opportunity.”

“Aye, Master Jianzheng doesn’t even care much, maybe he thinks a girl like junior sister doesn’t need to be too high a rank.”

“We can’t do anything either.”

The white-cloaked arcanists all said pitifully, sighs going all around.

Chu Caiwei pursed her lip, like a hopeless student with all Fs facing the frustrated and disappointed sighs of her superiors.

This world still doesn’t have chicken bouillon, I wonder if making chicken bouillon would count as a new form of alchemy. Xu Qi’an thought for a moment, “I might have an idea for this.”

Whoosh! In the laboratory, every single white cloak looked over, all of their eyes flashing gold.

“Really, you really have a way?” Song Qing’s eyes became wide, both with the surging pleasure of learning new alchemy, and the gratification of a father sorting out a load on their heart.

“I still need to think about it, I’ll come back with an answer in a few days.” After Xu Qi’an had finished, he looked at Chu Caiwei, “Miss Caiwei, do you have time today?”

“Yes yes...” All of the white cloaks in the room spoke in unison.

Song Qing pushed Chu Caiwei upright, saying with heartfelt emotion, “Xu Qi’an is a prized person of our Sitianjian, hundreds of times more important than just some alchemy, you go and accompany him round the inner city today.”

Just like that, Chu Caiwei was pushed by her brothers into the wolf’s den.

Xu Qi’an led Chu Caiwei to the estate agents, and an old manager came up eagerly to greet them, “Are the sir and madam buying or renting?”

An old man... in my past life there’d be a round bottomed round breasted female attendant that would come to greet me... Xu Qi’an lampooned, his face holding a light smile, “Buying.”

The old man’s smile became even wider; the commission from renting and buying were leagues apart.

“What sort of model?”

“A three-layered courtyard.”

The smile on the old man's face could no longer merely be described by "enthusiastic", rather it was like he had just seen his own father after being decades apart, happy nearly to the point of tears.

It was not unreasonable for him to be so excited; in the inner city, based on what district one was going for, a three-layer courtyard house was worth anywhere from 5000 to 10,000 taels of silver.

A three or more tiered courtyard house was not a residence any ordinary person could buy. The estate agents hadn't even sold a house of that calibre that year, but if they did then they could eat for a year on that one commission alone.

"Are there any houses that take your fancy Sir?" The old manager asked humbly.

"Give me a list of all the houses between five and seven thousand taels." Xu Qi'an sat down boldly, picking up the tea, and drank a sip of what was probably the best green tea the agents had to offer.

The flavour was average, no where near what Wei Yuan had.

Very quickly, the documents were assembled. Xu Qi'an looked them over, and thought carefully for a moment, before pushing away three from the file, leaving only one left.

"Why do you only want this one house?" Chu Caiwei grabbed out a honey sweet from her deerskin bag, like a magician conjuring a coin.

"Because the house is closest to the Jiaofangsi." Xu Qi'an raised his eyebrow, and laughed.

On the paper was written the location and the size, more detailed information must be retrieved separately. Xu Qi'an glanced over at it, and discovered that this one had a decent location, was very large, but also much cheaper than any of the other houses. The agents' code for it was: Yi-23.

"Why is this house much cheaper than the others?" Xu Qi'an asked calmly.

Yi-23's price was 5500 taels of silver. Other houses of a similar size usually had an asking price of close to 7000 or more.

"Naturally there's a reason for its price..." the old manager looked left and right, before saying in a low voice:

"That house is cursed, no one can live there, Sir would be better off picking another one."

Xu Qi'an and Chu Caiwei exchanged glances, *cursed? Then as a Nightwatcher I ought to go look, and see why it is cursed.*

But Xu Qi'an was not rash, as he asked cautiously: "Why so. Tell me in detail."

Although the capital was the territory of the Nightwatchers, it indeed hid an unknown number of high rank experts, and there did indeed exist some cults and evil places around. Since he was little Xu Qi'an had heard of strange tales around the capital city.

Chapter 162. Mighty Heavenly Dragon^[^1]

“Because the house is haunted!”

The old manager said in a low voice. His posture straightened, as he leant forwards slightly.

“It started about two years ago. Originally, that house belonged to a rich family. One night, they suddenly heard the terrible sound of a woman crying coming from the courtyard. A servant went to look, and saw a woman in all white sat beside the well, covering her face and crying.

“The servant asked who she was, but she didn’t answer, and just cried and cried. The servant thought that she was one of the women in the household that had been bullied, and had come to the courtyard to let out her feelings, so he raised his lantern and walked over, only to find...”

As he spoke, the old manager’s voice became even lower, as he made a posture as if he had seen the terrifying events personally.

“What next?” Chu Caiwei clutched her little fists tightly, her eyelashes quivering, face full of both anxiety and anticipation.

Xu Qi’an was reminded of the women in his past life, who were both terrified yet wanted to watch the horror movies. She was a seventh rank Master of Feng Shui though.

“At this time...” the old manager’s voice became indistinct, as his expression darkened, “The woman raised her head, her features were mutilated, her eyes hung on her cheeks, and her eye sockets were like two large black holes, with maggots crawling back and forth within. Her lips were dark purple, as black blood dripped from the corner of her mouth...”

Xu Qi’an saw goosebumps erupt over Chu Caiwei’s pale skin, as her delicate frame trembled slightly.

The old manager was very satisfied with Chu Caiwei’s reaction, and laughed with a sense of pride, “After the first rich family moved away, the several owners of the house afterwards befell the same thing. But scarier than that, afterwards it was as if they had had a curse placed on them, as accidents and problems started happening one after another, whether it be someone in the household injuring themselves, or their business falling off a cliff, but eventually as their family conditions worsened, they had to move out.”

That’s a rather nice ghost all things considered... Xu Qi’an asked, “Did anyone report this?”

“Of course, how could anyone not? But because there were no lives involved, after the officials came a few times, they stopped caring. Oh but the past owners did all invite monks over to look, and things did calm down for a while, but it wasn’t long before the whole ordeal flared up again. The crying started again, driving everyone mad.

“And the bad luck didn’t improve either, they were still doomed to it.”

Xu Qi'an knocked on the table, smiling, "What an interesting house, we'll go see this one first."

The manager was taken aback, as he thought *is this young couple not dumb? Young'uns don't know the world for what it is, always rushing into things with far too much confidence, thinking they're special.*

"Sure, I will take you there immediately. Take your time, there are plenty of properties." The old manager's face still presented a subservient smile.

...

The house was only three li away from the Jiaofangsi. To its east was a meandering stream, to its west a garden, and it was only a few dozen metres from the main street, neither close nor far. In the day there was no clamour and noise, but it was still convenient to go shopping.

It was tranquil in a sea of noise, a good place certainly.

The old manager unlocked the lock, and vigorously pushed open the heaven doors. He dusted off his hands, whilst simultaneously making an invitational gesture.

"Sir, Madam, this way please."

"Mhm!" Xu Qi'an nodded, and stepped inside with Chu Caiwei, looking around. A desolate and decrepit aura emanated from the house, as grey carpeted the floor, paint flaked off the walls. If it was the summer time, the courtyard would likely be full of weeds.

The garden gave off an earthy smell.

The old manager lead them round the front courtyard and hall. Xu Qi'an was rather satisfied; no matter the layout, or the construction, were all more open and comfortable than Second Uncle's house.

However the old manager absolutely refused to take them into the inner courtyard, as he said "Let's stop here. We can't go in there, it'd be bad luck."

I was just feeling that you were getting in the way... Xu Qi'an waved his hand, "You wait outside, we'll come out in a bit. The wife and I will have a look inside."

It was still the morning, and the sun hung high. The manager felt a bit more secure in such conditions, and reminded them, "Don't tarry too long."

Chu Caiwei only then processed what Xu Qi'an had just said, as she turned to him: "Who's your wife? Stop talking rubbish."

It's only a matter of time...

"You're very strange you know. Aren't you supposed to buy land with your savings, why are you buying a house?"

"When you have experienced the fear of being controlled by the housing market, you'll be just like me." Xu Qi'an said as he scanned around cautiously, "I know that apart from the Daoists, after any cultivator dies, their soul will stay in the world for a

long while, how long would depend on how strong their spirit was. Are there fragments of the soul of a particularly strong cultivator here?"

Xu Qi'an leisurely took out his jade mirror, and lightly tapped the back, pulling out the black and gold long sabre.

Meeting Chu Caiwei's wide-eyed stare, he laughed "This is my little treasure, and my secret. Don't spread it around! I'll treat you to dinner after."

"Oh." Chu Caiwei only glanced at it curiously, and did not pay it much mind. After all, her deerskin pouch also was a magic item that had the ability to store items bigger than it.

Some random mirror in exchange for a delicious meal? Profit.

Chu Caiwei lightly leapt onto the roof, clear light flashing in her almond eyes.

She carefully scanned around every corner of the house, occasionally jumping to new points on the roof and getting new angles, not missing any nook.

Finally, her flashing eyes fell on the well hole, as she saw light wisps of black qi emanating from it.

"Found it!" Pleased, Chu Caiwei jumped down lightly from the roof, and pulled Xu Qi'an to the well.

"There's resentful energy here, resentful energy that can nourish ghosts and wraiths."

Xu Qi'an was startled by this, and showed a guarded expression, pulling Chu Caiwei away.

"It's fine!" The double-A beauty shook her head, "The resentful energy is really weak, if there is a wraith down there it can't be strong at all. I can deal with this myself."

As she spoke, she stretched her hand towards her deerskin pouch, and started pulling out item after item: dog's blood, cinnabar powder, gold metal, as well as multitudes of strange items that Xu Qi'an had never seen before.

Then, she walked towards the well, and started writing and drawing on the ground with a dried branch, vaguely forming the shape of a bagua formation.

After she had finished the bagua formation, she placed those items that represented the utmost Yang into their correct places.

"Formation magic?" Xu Qi'an watched with great interest.

"Nope, this is a feng-shui array, strictly speaking it's not formation magic. With the well mouth as the centre, I made this pure yang feng-shui array, so that everywhere that the bagua covers has it's feng-shui changed, changed to the utmost yang. This will counteract the resentful energy." Chu Caiwei explained.

So this is just a simplified formation... Master of Feng Shui is the precursor to the Master of Formations, or should I say the foundation. Xu Qi'an's understanding of the Sitianjian's system deepened.

After about a cup of tea's time later, Chu Caiwei activated her qi-watching again, and nodded in satisfaction, "It's gone."

Xu Qi'an smiled, "Thank you, Miss Caiwei."

The two of them tidied up the materials together. Chu Caiwei patted her deerskin pouch, saying proudly, "I'll come with you to look at the feng-shui of the other houses first, and then, mn, later I want to go to Guiyuelou."

"Sure!" Xu Qi'an agreed without hesitation.

The two of them walked side by side, but a few steps later, Chu Caiwei suddenly paused, letting out a surprised "eh?". She turned around, clear light flashing in her eyes.

In view of her qi-watching eyes, those light wisps of black qi rose again from the well mouth.

"What's up?" Xu Qi'an saw that her expression was off.

"It's... it's not completely gone... no, the black qi is coming up again. There's something wrong with the well." Chu Caiwei jogged over, and crouched by the down, staring at the well mouth for a good while. Not believing in trickery, she remade the pure yang feng-shui array again.

Yet the result was as before, after a while the black qi rose again.

"What do we do about this?" Xu Qi'an didn't expect the matter to be this troublesome to deal with.

"The simplest method would be to ask over a monk from the Qinglong Temple to eliminate the black qi..." Chu Caiwei hadn't finished speaking before she saw Xu Qi'an run to the well.

His expression was serious, as his hands formed an incantation, low mutters on his tongue:

"Arrogant evildoers, pretending to be spirits and playing ghosts, *mighty heavenly dragon, revered kshitigarbha, mantra of the great veil, great wisdom of the buddhas, prajna padme hum! Like a dragon in flight, go!*"

Absolutely nothing happened, not even a gust of wind.

Chu Caiwei looked at him in a daze, "What are you doing?"

"Where I come from it's a spell to expel evil and capture monsters, I thought I'd give it a try," Xu Qi'an shrugged, "clearly, this spell from my hometown doesn't really work."

Chu Caiwei said, "I hadn't finished. Didn't that agent just say, that the previous owners all invited monks to cleanse the place, but after a bit of time the situation returned to before."

"This is in agreement with the earlier situation."

“Then what do we do?” Xu Qi’an said.

“I’ve got a hunch, let’s come back at night.” Chu Caiwei made an expression full of confidence, “however, you need to buy more food.”

That’s not an issue, but are you really playing by the book? Don’t forget your academic record, dear Caiwei... Xu Qi’an said with a smile, “With Miss Caiwei’s help, how could I not but be relieved. If you want more food I’ll buy you more.”

Thus the two of them left, and ran around to view all the other houses.

For Xu Qi’an, there were many choices, and he was not rushing to make a decision.

...

The warm sun shone on the balcony. Wei Yuan in full azure robes bathed in the sunlight.

His face shone like warm red jade, the whitening hair on his temples reflecting the sunlight shone brighter than silver.

“The case of Princess Pingyang brought down the Liang clique, the tax silver case hurt greatly the Wang clique. Currently in court the only factions who are relatively whole are the Yan clique and the Qi clique.” Wei Yuan pulled from his sleeve a secret letter, laughing, “Yet this secret letter, can break one of the Qi clique’s wings.”

Nangong Qianrou’s smile was cold, “Father, if we take the opportunity during the official evaluation to get rid of this stumbling block early, then you can extend your power greatly.”

“Not so hasty!” Wei Yuan was just about to explain further, when footsteps came from the stairs, as a clerk came in.

“Duke Wei, His Majesty has summons.”

...

The carriage slowly came to a stop outside the palace complex, Nangong Qianrou in its driver’s seat. Wei Yuan descended from the carriage, and with his adoptive son more beautiful than most women in tow, headed towards the imperial study.

Emperor Yuanjing very rarely gathered court, but will occasionally have a “mini-court” in the imperial study. In normal times, these mini-courts were rather rare, but as it was the official evaluation, they have become rather frequent.

After all, the emperor wasn’t the type to pay no attention to outside matters and cultivate under a rock.

Coming to the imperial study door, and stepping over the high threshold, Wei Yuan’s footsteps imperceptibly paused, before returning to normal.

“Your servant Wei Yuan greets Your Majesty.” The great eunuch bowed deeply, his gaze in an instant flying over the two great servants at Emperor Yuanjing’s side.

He smelled danger.

Emperor Yuanjing was expressionless, as he said solemnly, “Wei Yuan, we have asked you to lead the Nightwatchers, why is this?”

Wei Yuan replied: “To protect Your Majesty, to protect the capital.”

“Well said.” Emperor Yuanjing nodded, before suddenly grabbing a statement on the table, and violently threw it towards Wei Yuan, roaring: “And this is how you protect us? We have placed our utmost confidence in you, and this is how you repay us?”

Chapter 163. The Traitor’s Hand

Wei Yuan calmly picked up the document, unfolding it, and his pupils suddenly contracted.

Without another word, he knelt to the floor, proclaiming: “Your servant has betrayed Your Majesty’s trust, and deserves a thousand deaths, your servant only wishes to die.”

Seeing this attitude, those who were rearing to criticise and attack him were caught off guard. When Wei Yuan would refute the claim, they were prepared to jump out and ask Emperor Yuanjing to behead this mongrel, however now they didn’t know quite what to say.

Emperor Yuanjing snorted coldly, “At least you’re honest, Wei Yuan, if you dared to make excuses today, we would have you thrown into the dungeons.”

Head lowered, Wei Yuan did not respond.

Emperor Yuanjing snorted again, “The person who reported you was the very Gold Gong Zhu Yang of your constabulary.”

Wei Yuan still did not speak.

In the report was detailed several years of evidence of corruption and abuse by the Nightwatchers, from Gold Gongs to Silver Gongs. Some of it was backed by iron-clad evidence, whilst others were merely just stander.

Naturally, this report included a newly joined Bronze Gong, whose accusations were not trivial. In only a month he had exploited his position to embezzle over a thousand taels of silver, and went every day to the Jiaofangsi to sleep with the oirans there.

Just then, a chief supervising secretary of the Ministry of Law stepped out, proclaiming: “Your Majesty, the Nightwatchers have used their position for personal gain, knowingly broke the law, your servant suggests to execute Wei Yuan, to assert authority over the Nightwatchers and correct their malicious ways.”

Immediately, several other important officials concurred.

Emperor Yuanjing looked towards the guilty Wei Yuan, and said solemnly: “This matter will be dealt with by the Ministry of Law, the High Court, and the Prefecture constabulary together. We want a result within three days.”

And thus court ended.

Nangong Qianrou followed behind Wei Yuan with a dark expression on his face. They only had time to take a few paces, before he heard someone behind shouting “Please wait, Duke Wei.”

Father and son stopped in their tracks, turning around. Coming towards them was the Chief Justice. He wore a crimson robe sewn with wild geese and clouds, the mark of a fourth rank official.

The Chief Justice was similar to the Capital Prefecture Magistrate, even though their formal rank was not particularly high, they held in their hands immense political power, and were amongst the most influential of officials.

In the capital, an official's power and status was never determined by his rank, but rather by how much influence he had at hand.

After all, the aristocrats were above the official ranks, yet they had been squeezed to the margins of political power.

The white-haired, thin-faced Chief Justice greeted Wei Yuan smilingly, "This official would like to learn of some details about the accused on the list."

Wei Yuan nodded, not showing any emotion, "I will arrange for a dossier to be sent to the Chief Justice shortly."

The Chief Justice nodded in satisfaction, and carried on with a face full of smiles: "On another matter, this official appreciates the talent of Gold Gong Zhu, he is upright and unwavering, and so I would like to reappoint him under the High Court. In a moment this official will report this to His Majesty, but I wanted to inform Duke Wei first."

Seeing Wei Yuan still not reacting, the Chief Justice stepped forwards slightly, "Duke Wei knows what this official wants."

Upon this Wei Yuan laughed, "A worthwhile trade."

The Chief Justice looked on at Wei Yuan's back with a dark expression.

Returning to his carriage, Nangong Qianrou drove it towards the Nightwatchers Constabulary. In the carriage, Wei Yuan rubbed his temples, and sighed deeply,

"We've gotten their attention now..."

Nangong Qianrou laughed coldly, "Father, you clearly know he would have disloyal thoughts, yet you still insisted on old affections. What good is this, it's no longer such a simple case of losing some of your men."

In the Nightwatchers Constabulary, only the straight-as-iron Li Yuchun, and the stiff-as-a-plank Yang Yan had no interest in women and money.

There was also the schizophrenic Nangong Qianrou, who loved to shut himself in the dungeons all day to torture death row prisoners, who didn't care for money, and as for women ... who was more beautiful than he?

"Should we kill him." Nangong Qianrou said with marked resentment.

"Revenge must wait until after autumn." Wei Yuan replied calmly.

After a long period of silence, Nangong Qianrou steered the carriage through a market street, then into a quiet alleyway, before continuing: "Even though this matter is not because of him, he was a catalyst to this. Father you could have suppressed this, does he really warrant such attention from you?"

"I have plenty of Gold Gongs, but only one interesting young lad. I look forward to his growth." Wei Yuan smiled lightly, turning the conversation:

"Our Majesty would not be at ease seeing me sit arrogantly."

As he spoke, Wei Yuan finally let out a sliver of gloom.

"The Chief Justice wanted to use that name list to exchange for Father's secret information, why did you refuse?" Nangong Qianrou asked.

He knew that his Father's parting "a worthwhile trade" was not agreeing to the proposal of the Chief Justice, but rather was reluctantly deciding to give up his gold and silver gongs, and make a lose-lose situation.

In reply to his question was silence.

This year really has an eventful autumn - no - every official evaluation comes with large upheaval. Father has spent much effort on raising this troupe, this time it won't be easy to prevent any losses... Nangong Qianrou sighed.

Every official evaluation, there will be winners and losers, the Wang clique were the victors last time. But one thing was unavoidable, which is that all the cliques and parties would come out of it with heavy losses, a victory was still a pyrrhic one.

"When we return to the constabulary, find Xu Qi'an, tell him to lay low a few days, I'll find a way to extricate him."

"Yes." Nangong Qianrou nodded sourly.

...

At dusk, Xu Qi'an, who had long since finished looking at houses, spent an hour at the market with Chu Caiwei. Whenever they saw something delicious, he would buy it.

The big-eyed beauty was exhilarated, and had an amazing time, a sweet smile constantly on her face.

Going to the market is indeed more exhausting than fighting, this isn't physical exhaustion, but mental exhaustion. Xu Qi'an exhaled a long breath. As long as he could keep this woman happy, then all the exhaustion was worth it.

In his previous life he had heard a wise phrase: There are 70 ways to please a woman, one is to go shopping, and the rest is 69.

The latter Xu Qi'an was unable to put into action, and so naturally could not verify its authenticity, but going shopping was indeed quite effective.

They entered Guiyuelou, and ordered a sumptuous five tael worth dinner. Xu Qi'an, not wanting to make another loss, loosened his belt for a showdown with Chu Caiwei.

Just then, a lurch came from within his heart.

Without a change in expression, he stopped eating, took out the small jade mirror, and looked at its contents.

【ONE: There's been an incident in the Nightwatchers. The Gold Gong Zhu Yang reported Wei Yuan for embezzlement and corruption, this case involves four Gold Gongs, twelve Silver Gongs, and three Bronze Gongs, to be investigated by the prefecture, the Ministry of Law, and the High Court. Does this mean that Wei Yuan is about to lose favour, and will fall this year?】

Zhu Yang has betrayed Wei Yuan... reported so many people... Xu Qi'an looked intently at the words written on the mirror's surface, as raging waves crashed around in his mind.

Recently the interparty fighting has been like fire on kindling, with winners and losers abound. Because his status was not high enough, for Xu Qi'an this fighting became mostly a thing to be talked about after dinner, and not something to care about.

He originally thought that the Nightwatchers had a special position at court, and could sail steady in rough waters without any internal strife, but clearly he did not sufficiently understand the intricacies of court politics.

As a Gold Gong, Zhu Yang must hold a lot of dirt on many Nightwatchers. Now that he has suddenly rebelled, the Nightwatchers may be in for serious injury.

If I'm not wrong, this whole matter is because of me, hearing that Silver Gong Zhu took severe internal damage from my strike, developing a chronic issue and severing his future as a martial artist. And not only did I come out of it unharmed, but I am to be promoted.

... Indeed, if I were Emperor Yuanjing, I would not want to see Wei Yuan sitting trouble free. From the tax silver case to the Sangpo case, and then to this conflict happening right now, the civil servants have pretty much had their brains smashed out. The aristocrats have kept themselves pretty well, but this is probably because the real political power that they hold is very little, and so have no confidence to go into the fray.

Wei Yuan had said to me that in the current court the Wang clique sits supreme, and the current Wang clique is taking heavy losses. The Eunuch clique that Wei Yuan would be representing is also bound to be hurt.

I'm just a small Bronze Gong, I should... damn it, why would Zhu Yang just let me go?

In the brief moment of time that Xu Qi'an was thinking, the once court official number Four had already replied: ((FOUR: Embezzlement and corruption is merely an excuse, if we really talk about embezzlement and corruption, the Nightwatchers are controlled by Wei Yuan, how could their table manners be any worse than the bird-and-beast clothed officials?

【Emperor Yuanjing is merely taking this as an opportunity to knock Wei Yuan down a peg.】

Four is indeed an old experienced court official, although physically thousands of miles distant, his analysis is profound and forceful... this agrees with what I was thinking- eh? With One's abilities could he have really not seen through such as simple ruse? And ask such a stupid question... Xu Qi'an wrote:

【THREE: If this is Emperor Yuanjing's intention, then Wei Yuan can't do anything, right? No matter what he would have to give up these subordinates.】

【FOUR: Hehe, this depends on the attitude between Emperor Yuanjing and Wei Yuan. If it is merely some corruption, then the punishment will not be significant, but there will definitely be a group of people expelled from the constabulary.】

Oh shuanggui^[^1], is it... Xu Qi'an suddenly became worried for his own future.

“What are you doing drawing on the mirror?” Chu Caiwei was in the middle of eating a pork trotter.

So they say that all women are pig trotters...^[^2] Xu Qi'an put away his mirror, saying: “Nothing. When you finish, let's go see that haunted house.”

No matter what, first he must buy the house. Owning a stable asset was more important than anything else.

I have a decent relationship with Prefecture Magistrate Chen... if I'm really in the list of names, going to the prefecture constabulary won't be an issue, what is an issue is being thrown in the Ministry of Law's dungeons... I definitely have not committed any corruption, but the truth is not what's important... if it really comes to it I'll disappear for a few days. Tomorrow I'll ask Wei Yuan how to arrange this.

Leaving Guiyuelou, Xu Qi'an handed the jade mirror over to Chu Caiwei: “Keep hold of this for me for a few days.”

“Ok.” Chu Caiwei took it from him, and stuffed it into her little deerskin pouch.

After dark, they came to the haunted house, and the two of them vaulted the wall.

“Now can you tell me? Why are we coming back at night.”

The two's footsteps echoed in the desolate courtyard house. The wind was still, and there were no bugs in the rafters. The silence was frightening.

Chu Caiwei, clutching a toffee hawthorn in her hand, spoke crisply: “In the day, yang energy is abundant, and the ghost woman in the well won't appear. To get rid of her, we need to wait until she comes out.

“Furthermore, I suspect that there's something off about the well, I plan to go down and look at it in a bit.”

Go down and look at it... Xu Qi'an, long afflicted with thalassophobia, immediately became timid, especially knowing that there was something strange down the well.

They waited and waited, and the night became darker and darker. After a while Chu Caiwei said puzzled: “Let's just go down, are you going or not?”

“I don't... feel safe letting you go down alone.”

Chu Caiwei nodded, put her hand on the well side, and lightly hopped down.

This chick was scared when listening to the ghost story... Xu Qi'an grasped his dark gold sabre, and followed Chu Caiwei down the well. The well water was icy cold, he saw ahead of him a mote of light, that reflected a yellow-skirted girl's graceful figure. She swam through the water, looking almost like a mermaid.

That mote of light was coming from the bagua hung around her waist.

Swimming down for over ten minutes, Xu Qi'an suddenly saw Chu Caiwei stop. She took off the bagua plate from her waist, as if she was sizing up some creature.

Xu Qi'an swam over, and using the light given off by the bagua plate, saw that lying at the bottom of the well was a white-clothed woman.

She seemed to notice them, and slowly raised her head to look up. Her face was badly mangled, her eyeballs hanging by her cheeks, maggots wriggling in her black eye sockets.

Chapter 164. A Startling Discovery

Fuck me... the old broker wasn't lying, this ghost really bloody looks like this... Xu Qi'an's heart lurched in fright.

However he wasn't really scared, the frightened start was merely an instinctive reaction of someone who was once an ordinary person, seeing a ghost in real life. After all, he was the type who after watching a horror movie would be too scared to go to the toilet, and not being able to hold it in any longer, had to relieve himself into an empty coke bottle.

The white-clothed female ghost looked at them blankly for a moment, and as if detecting a threat, her mouth split open to her ears in a voiceless scream, as black blood spewed out, and she lunged towards the two of them.

In the dark depths of the well, dark aura was abundant, causing goosebumps to appear all over Xu Qi'an's body.

I don't know how to deal with resentful spirits... maybe I can just stab her... Xu Qi'an grasped his sabre hilt, planning to rush ahead of Chu Caiwei, yet the yellow-skirted girl held out her hand, stopping him from moving.

Her hands moved in complex formations, as the yin-yang koi on her feng shui plate started spinning. Xu Qi'an saw that the heavenly step "Gui" suddenly lit up.[^1]

A flash of dark light flew out of the feng-shui plate, grasping the ghost, and drawing her into the plate.

Chu Caiwei took back the feng-shui plate, and gave Xu Qi'an a dazzling smile. Then, she pointed towards the well floor, and began to swim in that direction. The two of them looked around a while longer, but did not discover anything more.

Splash... Xu Qi'an finally surfaced. There were no footholds in the well, and so he braced his hands against the slick well wall, saying to Chu Caiwei behind him: "Grab onto my leg"

Chu Caiwei let out an "oh", and grabbed on, letting him carry her out. Xu Qi'an felt her weight latch on, and quietly mumbled: "A little lotus just showing its buds... every day you eat eat eat, why do you still not grow."

“What are you saying?” Chu Caiwei didn’t hear clearly.

“Nothing. Climb up a little more, you’re pulling my trousers off. I’ve got another handle up here, enough for you to hold on to.”

Chu Caiwei looked around for a long time, and was unable to find this “handle” that Xu Qi’an was talking about.

They came out from the well, and Xu Qi’an worked his qi to dry his clothes of the cold well-water. Chu Caiwei instead formed another spell, pulling a ball of orange flame out of her feng-shui plate, and spun it around her. Steam came off in clouds, yet her clothes were left untouched.

After drying herself, Chu Caiwei said: “This is just a regular resentful spirit.”

A regular resentful spirit? Then how did she manage to exist for so long... Xu Qi’an frowned; the old estate agent had said that this ghost issue had gone on for two years or more. But what Chu Caiwei said next explained his doubts: “The well bottom connects to an underground stream, the resentful energy came along with it. I’m guessing that there’s a *yin* ley line underground.”

Xu Qi’an gathered that “*yin* ley line” was just technical terminology of Feng-Shui Masters, and nodded in realisation: “So that’s why your purification didn’t work, and the rituals the previous monks had done also didn’t work, because they weren’t Arcanists.”

Chu Caiwei nodded vigorously, expressing that she was an Arcanist and proud of it too, “You probably shouldn’t buy this house. The feng-shui of a yin ley line is terrible. Mn, it’s probably not a particularly big line, but living here for a long time will make you very unlucky.”

“At this price point why not?” Xu Qi’an looked at her strangely, “Did you think me asking you out was just for you to have a look? You’ve gotta help me make the feng-shui better.”

“But that’s so much effort...” Chu Caiwei pouted; learning alchemy every day was tiring enough, “Then you need to...”

“Buy you more food, I know.” Xu Qi’an said.

That’s more like it... She pursed her lips, before again leaping onto the rooftop, shouting downwards: “Help me higher.”

Do you want to stand abreast with the moon... oh, it’s a new moon today, then that’s alright! Xu Qi’an lampooned, whilst also jumping onto the rooftop, forming his hands into a small step. Chu Caiwei jumped on, her toe tip landing on his hands, and under the frightening strength of a martial artist, her delicate body shot up into the night sky like an arrow. Throughout all this, she used the power of her feng-shui plate to summon whisps of wind and rain, which swirled around her, slowing her fall.

Clear light shone in her eyes, as Chu Caiwei surveyed the whole house, before turning to look at the local area, observing the whole estate’s feng-shui.

She landed like a floating leaf, frowning: “That’s strange, the feng-shui in this area is pretty good, there shouldn’t be a yin-line here...”

Maybe your professional ability is just not good enough... Xu Qi'an did not dare to mouth off, asking "Could you look again? Or ask some other brothers from the Sitianjian to have a look."

"No need," Chu Caiwei waved him off, "We can just communicate with the spirit, use some empath techniques to see how she died. If there's no leads that way, then I'll ask some brothers to help."

"Quickly then, I have stuff to do tomorrow." Xu Qi'an replied.

Tomorrow he needed to go to the constabulary to find Wei Yuan. If daddy was willing to help him brace the fallout, then all would be well in the world. If daddy didn't bother with him, then he could only go into hiding, and try to find an opportunity to mitigate any lingering effects from this turncoat's betrayal.

And this house was exactly the base of operations that Xu Qi'an had chosen.

Because this house was haunted, few ever came close to this place, and this area wasn't a place where important civil servants gathered. It was quite far from the main roads, and so apart from the royal guard and the Nightwatchers, no one would ever pay any attention to this place.

Chu Caiwei said: "The spectre's yin energy is too strong, to channel her would require one to bear the burden of her dark qi. This is not too healthy for a woman's body, so you'll have to do it. With a martial artist's vigorous spirit, you won't have any lasting effects."

"Alright!"

Chu Caiwei pulled out her feng-shui plate, and began murmuring an incantation. The yin-yang koi started slowly swimming around, as a faint ball of black mist rose out, floating three inches above the plate. The black mist moved and struggled, yet was unable to escape the pull of the plate, as every time it tried, a wall of bright light bounced it back.

Chu Caiwei flicked her finger: "Go!"

The black mist shot like an arrow, and hit Xu Qi'an right between his eyes.

His whole body went cold, as a sliver of ice spread out from his spine, as immediately after he felt a presence full of resentment, insanity, and fear. This presence rushed into his soul, trying to control his body. Suddenly, the spirit felt something, and suddenly became quiet ... no, became timid.

This made Xu Qi'an decide against using his own consciousness to forcefully suppress the spirit, and he began to carefully feel for her consciousness.

Has she discovered the presence of Shenshu... the monk is indeed fast asleep, else it would've killed her in an instant.

His consciousness enveloped that of the spirit's, and the two of them began to come together. The next moment, flashes of memories began to surface within him, as if a film was playing in his head.

This woman was originally the daughter of a wealthy family in Taikang County. Due to her beauty, those looking for her hand in marriage crowded the door. According to an average person's future, she would be married to a good family, and live out the rest of her life in peace.

But an outing one day changed everything. In a lonely alley somewhere, human traffickers kidnapped her, and she was sent to a large house in the capital. In this house lived many women just like her, many other pretty and graceful young girls, even some boys.

They all had one thing to do, which was to provide themselves for the guests that came through the house to play with.

They would call them “master”, clearly there were many that had official titles. Yet when their officials’ robes went off, they were more bestial than beasts, playing and abusing the women in the house with abandon.

This woman’s spirit had once served many of these important men, and was even once forced to serve together with an effeminate young man. Resentment and hate filled her heart, yet she was afraid of death, and so suffered in silence.

Like this, many years passed, and one guest took a liking to her. She became this guest’s exclusive mistress, and her situation improved.

That man was called Tamraha. He was of middling height, burly of build, with a large flat face.

The cause of her death was because one day, she had accidentally overheard Tamraha and someone else’s conversation. The conversation included words such as “Yunzhou”, “cannons”, and “weaponry”.

At the back of the house was a well, where many women, men, and children who committed suicide, or were abused to death by the guests were buried. After this woman was killed, she was also thrown into the well.

After she died, she became a resentful ghost, yet was trapped in the well. It was only because of a coincidental opportunity did she end up following the underground stream to here. She fed off the resentful energy that was heavy in that stream, and managed to live until the present day.

In this stream of memories, Xu Qi’an saw many familiar faces. Especially the night before she died, at that conversation, Xu Qi’an through the woman’s senses saw who was talking to Tamraha:

The Qi Clique’s Minister of Industry!

“Whew...” Xu Qi’an opened his eyes, exhaling a stomach full of depressive energy.

This spirit channelling wasn’t humane, he had in first person perspective had a men on top of him numerous times, and deeply understood the humiliation of being forcefully ridden. At the same time, he was deeply affected by the ghost’s resentment, bitterness, hopelessness, and hate.

Luckily every day he practiced visualisation meditation, honing his spirit, and his will was far stronger than the average person. Otherwise, any normal person would have probably developed depression, or split personality disorder.

“It seems you’ve gained some unexpected knowledge...” Chu Caiwei looked at him intently. During the channelling, she had seen Xu Qi’an’s face distort and shift numerous times, being sometimes fierce, sometimes bitter, sometimes angry. She pointed a finger at Xu Qi’an’s forehead, pulling out the ghost woman, and put her back in the feng-shui plate.

That Tamraha isn't from the central plains... the people of the western regions have high noses, deep set eyes, the barbarians of the southern marches are known for their blue eyes, the northerners have dark skin, and some with bloodline from ancient mythical beasts, showing non-human features... Tamraha seems more likely to be from the places governed by the Church of the Warlock God.

What does the Warlock God have to do with Yunzhou? Yunzhou is in the south of Feng. Even though I only heard bits and pieces, but it seems that the Ministry of Industry has been sending weapons to the Warlock Church or Yunzhou for a long time.

This situation involves traitors to the country, I need to report to Wei Yuan immediately... His thoughts reaching this point, he summarised what he had heard to Chu Caiwei.

The latter listened intently, but did not understand at all, "When someone is tormented all their life, that resentful aura would not dissipate when they die, but it might not necessarily form a spectre. However if this resentful aura was added to and left to fester, it would be as clear as day. If there was a place like this in the inner city, then the Nightwatchers would have found it long ago."

"We'll talk about this later... oh right, can you give me back the mirror."

He was about to make a contribution of great merit, so he was no longer afraid of the title of "corruption and abuse of the law". The mirror thus naturally did not need to be looked after by Chu Caiwei.

What a joke, there was more than nine hundred taels of gold in there!

...

Xu Qi'an took Chu Caiwei to the Nightwatchers Constabulary, and on his way was stopped by four Bronze Gongs on patrol.

"It's me." Xu Qi'an showed his plaque.

"Master Xu?"

Even though they were of the same rank, but as Wei Yuan's favourite child, the Bronze Gongs didn't dare slight him.

"Why are you still out wandering the streets? Today the Ministry of Law, the city government, and the high court all came over, and took away many colleagues," a Bronze Gong said, "Apparently you were also on the name list, but you weren't at the constabulary, and avoided this catastrophe. Are you able to return home..."

The intention in his words were very clear: are you planning to escape?

"Who did they take?" Xu Qi'an asked, and discovered that of the four Gold Gongs included Jiang Lyuzhong, and of the Silver Gongs included Li Yuchun, Min Shan, and Yang Feng, the three who had helped him in the Sangpo Case.

*Jiang Lyuzhong's conduct is mostly righteous, even if there was corruption it was only a little bit, how was he also taken... is it because we're on good terms, and so Zhu wanted to take revenge...

Brother Chun is really unlucky, not taking a single kernel of silver, yet still thrown into the dungeon...*

It was obvious that Zhu's revenge was targeted, especially picking Xu Qi'an's subordinates and close friends, both weakening the Nightwatchers, and also taking revenge on him.

"Duke Wei definitely will save them, these silk-robed animals, do they really think we're so easy to bully?"

"Aye, don't say that, these years no one's been that clean..."

"Psh, Silver Gong Li is clean as a whistle, and he was arrested too no?"

The three Bronze Gongs muttered in helpless anger, complaining to themselves in front of Xu Qi'an.

"I heard that His Majesty personally gave the order to investigate, it won't be easy for Duke Wei to work his way around that one, how is this good? People have been especially frightened and silent today."

Xu Qi'an tried to comfort them, "There'll be a way."

The three Bronze Gongs shook their heads, sighing in their pessimism, before carrying on with patrol.

...

Xu Qi'an returned to the constabulary, and immediately made for the Tower of Noble Spirit, being stopped by the guards at the bottom.

"Duke Wei is resting, and none are to see him, these are the rules." The guard knew Xu Qi'an, but it was late in the night, Wei Yuan would not see anyone at this time.

"I have important matters, tell him quickly." Xu Qi'an replied solemnly.

"Master Xu can return tomorrow." The guard was very stubborn.

Chapter 165. An Opportunity to Turn the Tides

Xu Qi'an immediately stepped forward, pushing the guard over, kicking aside his blade, and lay into him with slap after slap: "Will you go or not? Will you go or not..."

The other guard was frozen in shock, not knowing whether or not to stop him.

"No... no more..." The first guard on the floor hugged his head, pleading desperately: "Please, I'm just a lowly guard, you're putting me in a difficult situation here, do you want Wei Yuan to punish me?"

Xu Qi'an was Wei Yuan's favourite, and so he didn't dare fight back. As long as the former did not try to barge into the Tower of Noble Spirit, the guards would not choose to attack.

"I understand, we all have our troubles." Seeing that he had successfully beaten the stubbornness out of the guard, Xu Qi'an drew back his hand, satisfied, and pulled out a tael of silver from his wallet:

"I hope this chunk of silver will be sufficient for you to take the risk. Otherwise I'll find someone else."

"Yes yes yes," the guard took the silver, picked up his sabre, and slipped into the Tower of Noble Spirit.

After ten or so minutes, Xu Qi'an saw candlelight flare up on the seventh floor, and a moment later, the guard came down: "Duke Wei invites you up. As for this madam..."

"An Arcanist from the Sitianjian, she's one of us." Xu Qi'an led Chu Caiwei inside.

In the day, there were clerks at their posts in the Tower of Noble Spirit, and it was still rather lively, but at night there was not a sound, and the building gave off an aura of loneliness.

Wei Yuan lives here all year round, does he not get lonely?

As he wondered to himself, he walked up to the seventh floor tea room. It wasn't warm inside, no coals were in the fireplace, and not a single servant was in the room.

Wei Yuan was sat by the table in his azure robe, with his black hair hanging loose, playing with an oil lamp in his hand. Seeing Xu Qi'an had arrived, he immediately ordered: "Make a fire, boil water, and light all the other candles."

He seems a bit cold... heh, even though Wei Yuan is an old master schemer, he seems not to have the talent for martial arts... haha, heaven is fair after all... Xu Qi'an obeyed his commands, lighting the candles one by one, putting the brazier by Wei Yuan's side, and placing a kettle of water on it.

"Today, I ordered Qianrou to tell you to hide, yet he searched the constabulary up and down, and could not find you. When he went to the Xu House, you had not returned. When he went to the Jiaofangsi, you weren't there.

"At this time of night, I gather it is not about the corruption case?" Wei Yuan laughed, turning his gaze to Chu Caiwei, and asking:

"Is this small Bronze Gong Miss Caiwei's sweetheart?"

Chu Caiwei's face went red: "No!"

However she was not mature enough, and the blush came and went just like that. Her eyes fell on the tea table, and saw nothing edible present.

This room suddenly became very boring.

"Duke Wei, I've discovered a troubling case." Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged by the table, facing Wei Yuan, "Today I applied for leave to go look at properties, and I found an

abandoned haunted house. I went with Miss Caiwei to deal with it, and I ended up channelling with the spirit..."

Xu Qi'an recounted what he saw during the channelling. At the start, Wei Yuan did not seem too interested, but when he heard that that house was a brothel for trafficked women, his face darkened slightly. When he heard about Minister of Industry meeting with someone seemingly from the Church of the Warlock God, to smuggle weapons, cannons, and furthermore with relations to Yunzhou, the great eunuch's face became as dark as the depths of the ocean.

"The Qi Clique really has ties to the bandits in Yunzhou. Very good, this information is very important." Wei Yuan looked at Xu Qi'an, kindness and appreciation in his eyes, "You are very able at providing pleasant surprises."

Then adopt me as your son... Xu Qi'an's heart said.

Freeloader Xu was someone who had pride, though, and so those words could not ever see the light of day.

"Duke Wei, Zhu Yang's betrayal is all because of me." Xu Qi'an said in shame.

"Without him, there would still be other incidents. This time, it is the Qi clique making enemies with me. Of course, there are other parties aiding and abetting behind the scenes." Wei Yuan did not explain why the Qi clique would make enemies with him.

The ones behind this corruption case is the Qi clique?

From the earth book, he discovered from One that Zhu Yang had betrayed the constabulary. However, One did not mention that the ones behind the scenes was the Qi clique, Xu Qi'an was under the impression that the Wang clique were really behind it.

This is too coincidental... today the "corruption case" arose in the constabulary, pulling me into it, and immediately I discover something this big.

...Is this due to a change in fortune, because I'm nearly in Refining Spirit? Otherwise it'd be unexplainable.

"How interesting, the Wang clique cosyng up with the Yao, the Qi clique making buddies with the Warlocks, what kind of people are running the country?" Chu Caiwei lampooned, "Has His Majesty's daoist cultivation turned his brain a bit funny?"

Xu Qi'an quickly elbowed the filterless young woman.

"His Majesty does not care for the affairs of court. Even though he still has ultimate authority, it is difficult to prevent some demons and evildoers from appearing. However his control of power is still very strong, and the many dukes of court are not idiots." Wei Yuan did not care much for Chu Caiwei's *Lèse-majesté*; after all the Sitianjian's Arcanists were all like this.

That Yang Qianhuan, in his rather comical style still turns his back even to His Majesty. And His Majesty would not be angered, as to those who were able and useful, yet devoid of political power, he was always kind and generous.

“Is not the Confucianists’ dragon-killing technique specifically for killing this dragon.” Xu Qi’an smirked.

As soon as he finished, he felt Chu Caiwei’s vengeance-filled elbow stick into his side.

Emperor Yuanjing controlled the court, and the officials all acted for him. When an emperor only cared about his own power, and not about the nation and its people, then the reasoning behind appointments will change, from those of talent to those obedient, and unlikely to rebel.

As to their abilities and moral conduct, that was priority number two, except for unparalleled savants like Wei Yuan.

Rotten to the core... Wei Yuan, is this why you want to clear the court of its rot... Xu Qi’an remembered something Wei Yuan had said to him once, about how he wanted to purge the court of its miasma, and rein back the decline of the country. But before this, he must be like the dust, and permit those under him to make error.

After all, he was a lone official, if he didn’t have people under him who were able, then how could he hope to fight against the weight of the entire court?

Wei Yuan took out paper and brush, planning to write a letter. Xu Qi’an obediently poured some water, and began to grind ink^[^1]. He watched as daddy Wei drafted his letter, and pressed on his seal.

“Take this letter to Zhang Kaitai, the current Gold Gong on duty. He will take people to root out this trafficking ring.” Wei Yuan said.

I know a scholar called Chen Tai, I wonder what this Zhang Kaitai means... Xu Qi’an nodded, “Yes sir.”

He lead Chu Caiwei out of the Tower of Noble Spirit, and asked after the whereabouts of Zhang Kaitai’s office. He was directed to the “Divine Sword Hall”, and when he arrived he realised that he had met this sword-wielding Gold Gong a few times before.

The Gold Gong that was wrapped in bandages was exactly him.

Zhang Kaitai was like a proud and lonely knight; when he felt silent, it was as if he was a thousand li from everyone.

If he were to be alive in the modern day, then he would be a Simon the Snow Blower^[^2] *type professional...* Xu Qi’an thought.

“What is it.” Zhang Kaitai’s eyes fell on the letter in Xu Qi’an’s hand.

Xu Qi’an handed it over, as well as recounting his conversation with Wei Yuan.

After he was finished, Zhang Kaitai’s usually calm and cool face broke into laughter and delight like ice melting in spring, “Good, good! This will make the Qi Clique face the consequences!

“If our brothers can overcome this hardship, then you’ll have been the most help.”

Zhang Kaitai's opinion of Xu Qi'an was alright, but he did not understand why Yang Yan and Jiang Lyuzhong would move spear and sword because of him, and even less so why Wei Yuan would look so favourably upon him.

Yes, he was quite brave, and was an excellent detective, talent was talent sure, but with Wei Yuan's status? Why would he nonetheless be so partial to a Bronze Gong?

After the Sangpo Case though, he admitted that Xu Qi'an was a talent worth nurturing.

And at this very moment, the delighted Zhang Kaitai started to appreciate this very ordinary Bronze Gong. He could always deliver pleasant surprises.

Fifteen minutes later, after gathering men and horses, he assembled forty bailiffs, over twenty Bronze Gongs, six Silver Gongs, and equipped them with muskets, crossbows, ropes and so on, a full military platoon.

Torches in hand, the whole squad ran after Xu Qi'an, their pace scarily quick. Under the flickering of torchlight, they arrived at their target in only half an hour.

There was no sign on the door of the manor, and the red lacquered door was shut tight. Zhang Kaitai waved his hand, his face cold, and tersely gave his command: "Surround it."

The bailiffs with their torches in hand, scattered around.

A Silver Gong stepped forwards, pulling out his sabre, and with a big shout slashed at the door, and under a flash of white light the red door exploded. The Nightwatchers rushed in, and a group of armed mercenaries came to meet them with angry shouts, yet as soon as they got there they were flattened by the Nightwatchers, pushed underfoot alive or dead.

Within came faintly the sound of a flute, yet that quickly stopped, as if its player had heard the commotion in the front courtyard. A moment later, the entire mansion arose in uproar.

Xu Qi'an, blade in hand, lead the vanguard, cutting down any mercenary guard he saw in his way. As he cut, the memories of the deceased woman flashed through his mind.

Images of those humiliated, abused, and mutilated women.

In one breath they came to the central courtyard, and saw ten or so guests and women gathered in the the warm and cosy main hall. Their clothes were askew, and their faces frightened.

"Nightwatchers?" the guests where aghast.

Xu Qi'an swished his black-gold sabre, leaving a line of blood on the floor. Pointing his blade at them, he said "Arrest them all, those who resist, kill without mercy."

He then left the main hall, taking a few Bronze Gong's to barge down door after door, and pull off the bed the sleeping guests who had just satiated their cravings. They were also brought to the main courtyard.

"You're not getting clothes, place your hands on your head and kneel down!"

He was well used to the process of raiding hotels. What was different though was that in the previous life, he would make fun of the guests caught with their pants down, asking: "You married?"

Now though, he was filled with anger, and a desire to kill.

Compared to the *qinglou* brothels, these type of private establishments were far more secretive, and so one could relax and talk proper business.

Further more, the fucking was good, the women were plenty, and you can abuse them however you wanted. Even if you killed one there were people to deal with the problem for you. Moreover, these were women of good upbringing; you certainly couldn't abuse the Jiaofangsi's women like this.

The sudden raid ended as quick as it started. Gold Gong Zhang took Xu Qi'an's suggestion, and stripped the guests of their clothes, forcing them to kneel in the yard with their hands on their heads, suffering in the cold January breeze.

At first, some yelled out "Scholars can be killed but never humiliated!", yet when Zhang Kaitai lopped off his head, the others quietened down.

In their actions, the Nightwatchers had the authority to cut first and ask questions later.

"Mister Cao, it's you... yo, Mister Wang is here too... Mister Tang is certainly short and plucky..." a Silver Gong laughed coldly as he talked to familiar officials.

In the warm main hall was gathered over twenty beautiful women, all very young of age. Amongst them were also a few eleven to twelve year old boys.

The Great Feng cracked down heavily on privately keeping young boys, but the number of businessmen and officials with that perversion were not insignificant, and so many places would have some around to serve these particular guests.

"It makes one want to vomit." A Silver Gong spat.

Zhang Kaitai was in the middle of interrogating the owner of the manor. He was a wealthily dressed middle-aged man, and he was vigorously kowtowing to the Gold Gong, saying: "This lowly man is guilty, this lowly man deserves death."

Zhang Kaitai asked darkly: "Who do you have behind this?"

"No one, sir, this lowly man only wanted to make friends with some important people in court."

Zhang Kaitai did not ask further, merely reminding his Silver Gongs to watch him closely, and not let him commit suicide. Inside the Nightwatchers' dungeon, even a stone statue would talk.

Xu Qi'an said: "There is a well in the back courtyard, especially used to dispose of bodies."

Zhang Kaitai looked deeply at the middle-aged man.

Xu Qi'an, Chu Caiwei, and Zhang Kaitai went together to the back courtyard, and found the well. Holding their torches over the opening, they saw murky black water, as a light stench of rot floated up from it.

When flesh rots away, the bones will sink down... we might have to go in and fetch them... the corner of Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched.

Suddenly, Chu Caiwei let out an "eh?". She looked left and right, before jumping onto the rooftop, surveying the whole courtyard.

“What is it?”

“There’s a sealing formation in the back yard, the resentful energy of the well was sealed up.” Chu Caiwei said.

Sealing formation? So this is why the Nightwatchers never discovered this place... Xu Qi’an nodded in realisation, as his expression suddenly became strange:

“Are formations not the work of you Arcanists?”

At the same time, a doubt welled up in his mind: given that they had the ability to set a formation and seal the resentful energy, then why didn’t they get rid of it outright?

It must be said, even a seventh-rank Chu Caiwei could do as much. Put a yang-aura formation in the yard, and your troubles would be gone.

“Then... well there must be wandering arcanists.” Chu Caiwei pursed her lips, “Didn’t the tax silver case have signs of an arcanist behind it?”

I don’t have any rebuttal! Xu Qi’an moved his gaze back to the well entrance, and saw Zhang Kaitai looking at the well wall, deep in thought. Following his gaze, Xu Qi’an finally saw that within the well was carved many complicated and strange runes.

“This is the work of the Warlock Church, it should be some sort of curse. As to what exactly, I don’t know. Get someone to make an ink rubbing, we’ll look at it later.” Zhang Kaitai explained.

“Mn, from what I saw of the resentful spirit’s memories, this place indeed has something to do with the Church of the Warlock God.” Xu Qi’an said, as internally he lampooned:

I can’t remember how many times I’ve been fucked by that Tamraha, if I can find him, I’ll make him know what a large one really is.

Just then, commotion came from the front hall, along with the screams of women and boys.

Chapter 166 Xu Qi’an, the Flawless

Without another word, Zhang Kaitai lead the way into the main hall. Xu Qi’an wanted to rush ahead along with Gold Gong Zhang, but was nowhere near as quick. As he rushed into the room, he saw Zhang Kaitai, sword in hand, slice in half the last of the paper figures. The floor was littered with bits of cut paper, and at the side were nearly ten paper men. Further more, two young boys lay lifeless on the floor, their throats cut open, blood pouring everywhere.

“What’s happened?” Xu Qi’an exclaimed in shock.

“Paper men suddenly burst out from these two people’s bodies, intending to silence the victims, but were stopped. “The Silver Gong guarding the victims replied, though he targeted his reply towards Zhang Kaitai.”

“What about the perpetrator?” Zhang Kaitai asked, his gaze scanning the room, falling on the middle-aged man being guarded by several Bronze Gongs, who was crouched in the corner with his head buried in his arms, hiding his face.

“Hey, it’s over.” One of the Bronze Gongs kicked him, and the middle aged man limply slumped to the floor.

Everyone’s faces turned, as that Silver Gong rushed over, checking the man’s pulse and breath. With an ugly look on his face, he clasped his fists and bowed towards Zhang Kaitai, voice panicky:

“This lowly officer has failed in his duty, please may Sir sanction me!”

Zhang Kaitai’s whole aura became dark and depressive, as a vein bulged on his forehead in anger. He became silent for a few moments, before letting out a slow breath: “It’s not your fault.”

He walked towards the corpse and grabbed the man’s collar. With a gentle shake, there came the sound of ripping fabric, as his clothes tore themselves into pieces.

The naked body of the man was exposed to the crowd, and they could see a bright red mark on his chest.

“This is a warlock’s curse of death. He takes someone’s hair, blood, nails, or the like, and along with their birth and horoscope, and can kill them without a trace.” Zhang Kaitai shook his head.

This could not be guarded against, especially by martial artists, who were only good at hitting things.

“Then what about the paper men?” Xu Qi’an asked.

Zhang Kaitai knelt by the corpse, and thought for a long time, “These paper dolls remind me of something. The Church of the Warlock God have many sly and mysterious techniques - they have death curses, they can kill people in their dreams, and they have the ability to control souls and corpses.

“As for these paper dolls, they are made by someone sealing dead spirits into a paper body, and thus control them.”

Xu Qi’an, so sharp of mind, immediately understood what Zhang Kaitai meant, exclaiming: “So that well in the back courtyard... it was used by the Warlocks especially to raise ghosts?”

This explained why it was sealed, and not completely purified.

“Then that warlock is nearby”

“But he must have already left. Our ambush caught him off guard, thus he hid in the surrounding area, and cast his curse of death. Now that the man has died, he won’t continue to stay.”

“Gold Gong Zhang, can even you not sense these paper dolls? Earlier we didn’t even realise that they were hiding on these two boys.”

“One, a martial artist can only sense what is about to cause danger to himself; two, a paper doll is both an article possessed by a ghost, and also a seal on it - it can block outside senses; three, paper dolls are not particularly well suited for killing, they are usually used to run errands, not kill enemies.”

In a rush of anger, Xu Qi'an cursed, as his black-gold sabre came out of its scabbard, and under a cold flash of the blade a roof pillar split in two, as broken wood and tiles rained down. The women and boys all fled, seeking shelter, as screams broke out in waves.

In the shadows of the neighbouring street, a figure hid in the darkness. Seeing the fallen-in roof from afar, and the commotion that followed, he let out a “heh”, and sank back into silence...

Manor of the Minister of Industry.

In the master bedroom, the Minister of Industry hugged his concubine, and slept sweetly. His wife had passed many years ago, and he had never remarried.

A paper doll floated in on the wind, and lightly landed on the courtyard floor. A few seconds later, it climbed up, and with great difficulty squeezed itself through the crack in the door.

It carefully avoided the charcoal brazier, and stepped with stiff steps over to the bedside. It gathered a wisp of wind, and floated onto the bed, landing beside the pillow of the minister.

Shakily, it stood up on the pillow. Gathering up its strength, it drove itself headfirst against the Minister's face. The Minister of Industry, who normally slept very lightly, frowned, and slowly opened his eyes. After seeing the paper doll though, all traces of sleepiness vanished.

He first observed his concubine, and confirmed she was sleeping soundly. Then, he picked up the paper doll, stood up, and came to the table. He lit the candle, and opened the paper doll, reading the tiny tadpole-like characters within.

As he read, the Minister's face suddenly turned, as his long moustache started trembling. As he finished, however, he let out a long sigh of relief, and his demeanour became calm and relaxed.

After burning the paper doll in the candlelight, the Minister of Industry returned to his bed. Looking at the sleeping concubine, he hesitated for a moment, before slowly picking up the pillow, and tightly covering her face...

...

The next day, the Ministry of Law.

The Minister of Law woke early, and personally came to the prisons, inspecting the imprisoned Nightwatchers.

The corruption case involved the Nightwatchers from Bronze Gong to Gold Gong, forty-six people in total, and they were all held at the Ministry of Law.

According to the roles, the three offices should have equally taken a portion, and independently question them. However the Wang Clique lost two core members during the tax silver case and the Sangpo case, and were irreconcilable with Wei Yuan. Thus, to be able to kick Wei Yuan when he's down, the Ministry of Law was even more enthusiastic than the Qi Clique's High Court.

“When people act, heaven watches, do you think that silence will allow you to escape the king’s law?” The Minister of Law laughed coldly, shaking his head, “This official has already investigated your assets, and drafted an account. After His Majesty has approved it, don’t think any of you can escape.

However, this official nonetheless wishes to give you an opportunity. Who is it who ordered you to embezzle silver, and abuse the common people? Is it Wei Yuan?”

No one answered.

Suddenly, someone laughed coldly: “Embezzlement? May the Right Honourable Minister tell me, how much silver did I embezzle? I’ve been in the Nightwatchers for over a decade, I haven’t taken a single copper coin.”

Hmph, and you dare to speak out... the Minister for Law followed the sound, walking over, and saw the man who spoke out. His gaze however, fell not on the figure, but on the spotless clean cell around him.

All the debris, weeds, and other refuse were swept neatly into one corner, the spider webs that usually adorned the corners were nowhere to be seen, the grass mat that served as a mattress was still tattered and worn, yet it was aligned tidily on the wooden bed. Every detail was perfectly accounted for.

Somewhat bewildered, the Minister of Law inspected the man. He was a Nightwatcher with a stiff expression, and even though he wore a prisoner’s uniform, he gave one a sense of cleanliness and order. His hair was brushed meticulously, and the rolled up sleeves on his left and right arms were extremely symmetrical.

Looking at this man, looking at this cell, many Ministry of Law officials, including the Minister himself, could not help but feel a strange sense of relaxation...

“What is this person called?” Minister Sun asked his attendant.

“Li Yuchun.”

“How much silver has he embezzled? How many houses does he have in the inner city?”

The official started flicking through his dossier, searching intently for some time. Only when Minister Sun glanced over, did he say in a low voice:

“In the inner city he has a single house, a rather poor one at that. Living there is only his old mother, and his pregnant wife. As for money... the Ministry only found fifty taels of silver in his residence.”

“Fifty taels?” Minister Sun was stunned; a Silver Gong he was, yet his family wealth was only fifty taels of silver?

“How did you search?” Minister Sun felt that the ministry’s men had just done a half-rate job. The official whispered into his ear for a moment, and after Minister Sun had

listened to his words, he fell silent. As if he couldn't be bothered with this cleanliness-loving man any more, he turned and left.

In the newly silent dungeons, Jiang Lyuzhong leant against his cell wall, and sighed.

"Old Jiang, do you have a plan?" The neighbouring Gold Gong tapped on his wall, asking.

"What plan can I have? We'll just find some other way to make a living. I won't go undercover, my wife and children are all in the capital." Jiang Lyuzhong replied grumpily.

"Heh, I have no wife or children, maybe I'll go wander the Jianghu. I've gotten bored with the capital." the other Gold Gong said.

"Bullshit." Jiang Lyuzhong laughed coldly, "Just earlier you said you planned to marry and have children, and settle down in the capital. I only regret not taking more earlier, and only occasionally skimming here or there, then being thrown in this cell wouldn't be an injustice!"

"Heh, then you might as well just become a bandit after getting out."

"Sod off."

The worst outcome would be to be terminated, their lives at least weren't at risk. As long as high-rank martial artists did not commit anything too egregious, the crown will usually not send down capital punishment.

As a high-rank martial in rage was a terrifying force indeed.

"Eh..." there was another round of sighs, followed by a long silence.

Leaving the dungeons, the Minister asked: "Why haven't I seen that little piece of trash surnamed Xu?"

"It seems he escaped." The attendant responded.

"Have we put out a wanted notice?"

"It's already been drafted. When the Ministry stamps its seal, we can send it out."

Minister Sun nodded in satisfaction, "How many taels of silver did the rascal embezzle?"

"Yesterday, we sent people to search the Xu House, we found only several hundred rolls of silk, but not much silver."

Minister Sun grunted in agreement, "Take the rolls of silk for now, when all is said and done, distribute it to people in the constabulary."

"This uh... we didn't dare confiscate the silk." The official said in a low tone.

Minister Sun's gaze suddenly sharpened: "Mn?"

The official laughed bitterly: "Those, uh, those were given by His Majesty, nobody dares to take them, lest afterwards that Xu Pingzhi reports them..."

"...I've heard that that rascal often goes to the Jiaofangsi?" Minister Sun tried to find another point of weakness.

"Yes sir, we've sent people to ask the matron of the Jiaofangsi, she said that in the span of two months Xu slept with eight oirans, and was close with the Reflecting Plum Pavillion's Fuxiang."

"That's it then!" Minister Sun felt a wave of excitement, "He's spent all the silver on women, we can use the statements made by the women in the Jiaofangsi as evidence."

With great awkwardness, the official replied: "But the women's statements were all the same..."

Minister Sun turned to look at him with a questioning look, as the official continued indignantly: "Those women all said, they admired Xu's talent, and willingly served him for free."

Minister Sun's body swayed, as he nearly fainted in anger.

"Bastard thing! If there's no flaws about him, then we'll make flaws! If he has no money we'll give him money!" Minister Sun exclaimed darkly: "This official will never let this little bastard go!"

He angrily stormed back to his office, downed a cup of tea, yet his chair wasn't even warmed when a clerk rushed in in a hurry, reporting:

"Minister Sir, a message from the Palace, His Majesty has summons."

Minister Sun eyed the water clock in the corner. At this time of day, the morning court had already long gone. If His Majesty was summoning him, then either there's an urgent matter, or it was a small court.

What is His Majesty being so diligent about, summoning civil servants practically every day... the Minister of Law nodded: "Arrange the carriage."

Chapter 167. Taking Sister and Auntie to See the House

Minister Sun arrived at the imperial study, as within the wide and resplendent room were only three people. They were Emperor Yuanjing sat on his high chair, the cunning and wry Prime Minister Wang, and the great Azure Cloak, with his whitening temples.

He unconsciously glanced towards old brother Prime Minister, discovering that his expression was grave, and his gaze dim. This made Minister Sun, who originally had thought that this was just a regular small court, suddenly start in surprise.

What black magic is Wei Yuan up to... he immediately turned to inspect the great Azure Cloak, but the inscrutable great eunuch maintained a warm expression, deep and reserved, leaving one unable to see a hint of what he was feeling inside.

Suddenly, a sense of unease arose within Minister Sun. After carrying out his regular formalities, he silently stood at his usual spot.

Time slowly ticked by, as civil servants slowly trickled in, bowing and assuming their positions. Throughout this process Emperor Yuanjing had his eyes closed, meditating, until he heard the voice of the Minister of Industry.

Emperor Yuanjing opened his eyes, and surveyed his servants. Anyone who was able to be invited to attend the small court, were all the most senior of the senior in government, less important civil servants simply didn't have the qualifications.

"Dear Lord Wei, you may tell all the lords present."

Wei Yuan stepped out, speaking: "Last night, in the inner city the Nightwatchers discovered a house housing catamites and unregistered prostitutes, the women there came from good backgrounds, and the young boys were also from normal families. They were kidnapped and trafficked there, and were forced to serve the guests who stayed over there..."

"Last night, the Nightwatchers launched a secret raid on the residence, and rounded up this nest of criminals. We arrested thirteen patrons of the brothel, ten amongst them with official ranks, and three are influential merchants in the capital. Furthermore, the Nightwatchers also retrieved the skeletons of forty corpses from the well in the back courtyard, they were all slaughtered innocents."

Wei Yuan's words worked up a torrent in the Imperial Study, as the great civil servants all started discussing the matter, not caring about the regulation of keeping silence.

Human trafficking, illegal prostitutes, political favours for sex... any of these would bring down a myriad calamities upon any official, especially during the time of the Official Evaluation. However much one tried, this could not be covered up.

Yet Wei Yuan hadn't finished talking, as he revealed another huge bombshell: "From our investigations, the owner of the house had relations with the Church of the Warlock God, evidence given by the magical runes carved on the well entrance. The owner of the residence confessed that he was working under the orders of the Minister of Industry. That residence was not only used as a place for building cliques, but also secretly a relay point for communication with the Church of the Warlock God."

The uproar was immense.

If one could say that before they maintained some of their demeanour, now it was like the vegetable market, with some cursing Wei Yuan's slanderous accusations, and some shouting for Wei Yuan's damn head to go rolling.

The head eunuch, standing beside Emperor Yuanjing, shouted three times for order, yet he could not suppress the chaotic scene.

Forming cliques and selling prostitutes, kidnapping and trafficking people, forcing innocent women into sex work, these were all crimes with tolerable consequences, but colluding with the Church of the Warlock God? That was a different matter; that was treason.

According to the laws of the Great Feng, all guilty of treason, were sentenced to nine familial exterminations.

Crack! Emperor Yuanjing smacked his hand on the table, and the Imperial Study immediately returned to silence. His icy gaze scanned over his officials, and fell on Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen.

“What does dear Lord Wang think?”

The Prime Minister stood out, and said solemnly: “This matter must be investigated to its fullest, and not dallied upon.”

Although his words sounded like he was trying to smooth things over, but the Ministry of Law’s Minister Sun could clearly tell that big brother Wang was leaning more towards Wei Yuan. He immediately understood big brother’s intention.

If one stood by the side of the Minister of Industry, then at most they would be owed an incredible favour, as well as smacking down some of Wei Yuan’s pride.

But if one stood by Wei Yuan, if this matter was found true, then the Minister of Industry would be doomed, and the Qi clique would have lost one of its leaders.

In the Sangpo Case, the Wang clique had wanted to shift the blame onto the Ministry of Industry, and land a heavy blow on the Qi clique. Even though they had failed, but there was indeed another opportunity.

Emperor Yuanjing looked towards Wei Yuan: “Where is the perpetrator?”

Wei Yuan shook his head, sighing, “Last night, the perpetrator was murdered by the Warlock’s curse of death, and died without giving evidence.”

Emperor Yuanjing frowned.

The Imperial Study immediately fell into deathly silence, as everyone looked with strange expressions towards Wei Yuan, as if saying: *What was all that about then?*

The ever cool and collected Prime Minister Wang tilted his head, also frowning at Wei Yuan.

The Minister of Industry’s mouth curled, as he stepped out with a cold smile, exclaiming: “Your Majesty! Your servant has been wronged! Wei Yuan is trying to slander your servant, please may Your Majesty take the lead.”

Emperor Yuanjing made a dark expression, “Wei Yuan, what do you have to say?”

Wei Yuan was incomparably self-assured, as he replied: “Your servant asks Your Majesty to summon Bronze Gong Xu Qi’an.”

Bronze Gong Xu Qi’an... Hearing this name, many great officials’ expressions became rather distorted. Based on last time on the situation with Zhou Chixiong, in these times asking to summon Xu Qi’an must mean that this matter has not ended, and Wei Yuan has left a hidden ace up his sleeve.

Especially, members of the Wang Clique had already developed a slight amount of PTSD from hearing the words “summon Xu Qi’an.”

The Minister of Industry's face turned slightly, but he quickly hid his emotions, and kept his calm.

Emperor Yuanjing went silent for a few seconds, before saying: "Summon him."

Several minutes later, Xu Qi'an, in his black robes, bronze gong, and black cloak entered the Imperial Study. The long sabre that usually hung about his waist was temporarily confiscated from him.

With him also were Chu Caiwei and two other white cloaks from the Sitianjian.

"Your servant greets Your Majesty." Xu Qi'an bowed and saluted.

Emperor Yuanjing gazed expressionlessly at this small Bronze Gong. Wei Yuan turned his head, smiling: "Recount your findings to His Majesty."

Xu Qi'an immediately started recounting, from planning to use the silver His Majesty had given him to buy a house, to finding said house was haunted, then through channelling with the spirit, finding out about this place... everything was said as it was.

The more the Minister of Industry listened, the uglier his expression became, as his heart slowly sank into the depths.

The man's already dead, last night the Nightwatchers were clearly unbelievably angry... they don't have evidence, they're bluffing me... the Minister of Industry calmed his emotions, and scoffed internally.

This official has served half his life, gone through countless winds and rains, do you think this small trick will stop me, heh.

Xu Qi'an finished, and saw that Emperor Yuanjing seemed quite aloof, without any expression on his face. So he added one final sentence: "The female spirit is sealed in the feng-shui plate of the Sitianjian's Miss Caiwei, if Your Majesty wishes for evidence, Your Majesty can pick a trusted aide to channel with the ghost."

Internally, he thought: *Get a guy to do it!*

Emperor Yuanjing thought for a while, before looking to the head eunuch beside him. Of all the people present, the one he trusted most naturally was this person that had attended to him all his life.

"I will serve Your Majesty with my life." the head eunuch knelt down.

"My lord, there is no need for fear, there will be no significant effects." Xu Qi'an saw that the eunuch was somewhat frightened, and reckoning that he did not know much about what a channelling is, tried to comfort him.

At most it will be seeing a man riding between your legs in first person, but don't worry, it's like watching a movie, you won't feel anything.

Xu Qi'an felt that for these eunuchs, who had all missed their chances (cocks) to sleep with any women, that this was a blessing. You couldn't sleep with anyone, so being fucked by a guy would make up for missing out.

Chu Caiwei took out her feng-shui plate, and walked towards the head eunuch. Bright light emanated from her plate, as the yin-yang koi started spinning around, expelling a ball of black mist. She lightly shook it, launching the black mist towards the eunuch's forehead. The latter instinctively leant his head back, attempting to evade, but in the next moment the black mist had entered his soul. Chu Caiwei pointed a finger at his temple, helping him and the ghost's spirits to merge, otherwise with the fortitude of the eunuch's soul, he was at risk of being taken over by the ghost entirely, unable to tell who from who.

Emperor Yuanjing, and the many officials in the study, all looked intently at the eunuch, seeing his expression suddenly being frightened, suddenly being furious, suddenly hopeless, suddenly bitter.

This process continued for about fifteen minutes, before Chu Caiwei pulled back her finger, simultaneously pulling out the black mist, putting it back into the feng-shui plate.

The great eunuch whimpered, as he opened his eyes, and fell to the floor crying: "Your Majesty, Your Majesty, please take charge for your concubine..."

As he cried and cried, he finally came to his senses. He was a man, at least he used to be. The experiences just then were the experiences of the female ghost, and not himself.

Once he realised this, the head eunuch wiped his tears, as his expression slowly calmed. However, his voice still carried a tinge of grief: "Your Majesty, your servant has seen everything..."

Emperor Yuanjing nodded: "Speak."

He immediately glanced at Chu Caiwei, and the other white-cloaks, seeing azure light glowing in their eyes, before turning satisfied back to the eunuch.

"Your servant saw that she was kidnapped, and sent to the capital. Every day she was forced to serve the patrons of the brothel... no, none of the patrons paid."

The great officials exchanged glances amongst themselves. Hearing his words, what Wei Yuan said was not slander. This was indeed a place where kidnapped innocents were forced into prostitution.

"Later, she served a patron called Tamraha, and gained his appreciation, becoming his mistress."

Tamraha... that was a foreign name.

Emperor Yuanjing narrowed his eyes, glancing towards the Minister of Industry, nodding, "And then?"

"One night, she accidentally overheard a secret conversation, and heard 'cannons', 'weapons', amongst other words, and because of this was brutally murdered, and thrown into the well. Your servant saw, that the person talking with Tamraha..."

He turned his head, pointing towards the Minister of Industry, exclaiming in his sharp voice: "was Minister Liu!"

Emperor Yuanjing's face immediately turned iron-grey.

The imperial study exploded. The wind's course changed, as all the great officials turned their spear-heads towards the Minister of Industry. Amongst them, the reactions of the High Court

Censor was especially extreme, sighing with emotion, and condemning Minister Liu for his abhorrent actions.

Under a flurry of conversation, the colour of Minister Liu's face was like mud, with no sign of life, stiff as a wooden doll.

...

Leaving the imperial palace, Xu Qi'an rode beside Wei Yuan's carriage.

"Duke Wei, the Minister of Industry is one of the leaders of the Qi clique. With him in your hand, you can pull up the Qi clique by its roots."

From within, came Wei Yuan's laughter, "It's not the time to pull up the Qi clique. Without the Qi clique, the greatest benefactor would not be us."

Xu Qi'an with his silver rank in political intrigue did not try to argue the matter, changing the conversation: "So I can use this merit to atone for my crime?"

Wei Yuan grunted assent: "the Ministry of Law won't arrest you. As for the others, we need to see His Majesty's intent. Later, I will sent a letter to the palace."

Mn, this matter is best left to Wei Yuan... my promotion to Silver Gong should be all but guaranteed... let's go home first, and comfort Auntie and Uncle.

Xu Qi'an thus asked for a day off, and bade farewell to Wei Yuan. Slapping his horse on the buttock and urging her on, they rushed back home with fiery vigour.

Second Uncle was still on duty, and not at home, leaving Auntie and his two sisters there.

Auntie sat in the front hall, drinking tea and eating desserts, occasionally feeding Little Pea, who was otherwise playing with a wooden doll to the side. She was wearing a dark blue gauze dress, her silken hair was held tight in a bun, with a beautiful golden hairpin through it. The makeup on her beautiful face was exquisitely done.

Seeing that her unfortunate nephew had come home, Auntie's expression turned slightly, as she lowered her voice, speaking quickly: "What are you doing here? Your uncle said that there's spies from the Ministry of Law all around, go, shoo!"

"Big bwother, big bwother..." Xu Lingyin happily came to greet him, making an emergency stop right in front of him. Her little body swayed with the inertia, as her round face looked up at her brother:

"Did you bwing back something to eat?"

"No."

Xu Qi'an's coldness shattered his tiny sister's hopes and dreams.

"Oh."

Xu Lingyin though was a pragmatic young woman, though, and immediately discarded Xu Qi'an like a worn out shoe. She waddled away, going to play by herself.

Xu Qi'an didn't want to bother with Auntie, going directly to the table to pick up a cake, only to be slapped away. Auntie stared at him forcefully: "I'm talking to you."

Xu Qi'an replied casually: "The situation has been resolved, I've just come home to tell everyone."

Hearing that all has been resolved, Auntie let out a small smile, yet she quickly wiped it off her face, and scolded him: "All you do every day is get into trouble, can you let the family live in peace for a while?"

From the tax silver case, incidents have come one after another without rest, every couple days something else comes up. At the start Auntie was worried and scared, but now she had gotten somewhat used to it.

Which was not necessarily a good thing.

Xu Qi'an did not respond to Auntie's scolding, saying: "I've already picked out a house, I want to take Lingyin and Lingyue to look at it, will Auntie go too?"

Hearing that he had picked out a house, Auntie's beautiful eyes lit up, as she replied reservedly: "Well I have nothing better to do, might as well go with you to take a look."

Chapter 168. Oh Lingyin, Don't Make Big Brother Drive

Xu Qi'an rode on his horse, as the old estate agent drove the carriage. Within was sat Xu Lingyue, Auntie, and excitedly sticking her head out of the window was Xu Lingyin.

Because big brother was with them, they didn't need to bring their maids and servants; too many people were inconvenient.

Along the way, he bought some snacks for Xu Lingyue and Xu Lingyin, and asked towards the window: "Does Auntie want any?"

Auntie refused.

When they came to the house, the women stepped out of the carriage, and Xu Qi'an saw Auntie wiping the corner of her mouth.

"The location is not bad, it's not too far from the market, there's a river beside it..."

Auntie started commenting in satisfaction. Standing in front of the main door, she frowned, saying:

"Why does it look shabby?"

How could it not, it's haunted... Xu Qi'an said, indicating to the agent to open the door. Auntie lead the two girls into the house, and what met then was a broken and desolate scene. It had clearly stood uninhabited for many years, and unmaintained too.

She frowned more: "This is it?"

"This house hasn't been lived in for many years, not even any renters. The agency reckons that it could be sold off for 4000 taels and to be done with it, but the owner refuses to sell it for that much..."

For thousand? Auntie narrowed her eyes, and very casually asked: “How much is its asking price?”

“Five thousand taels.” The agent said.

Auntie did not continue talking, and started looking around the property. Wherever she walked, her criticism followed, but the old agent was experienced in his trade, ate his pride and let her talk. Seeing that this beautiful woman and her beautiful daughters were heading towards the inner courtyard, the old agent jumped in fright, and looked desperately towards Xu Qi’an.

“It’s fine.” Xu Qi’an said.

There shouldn’t be any issues during the day… the old agent looked at the beautiful Auntie’s figure. Her gently swaying buttocks were extremely attractive that day.

“Does the valued customer really want to purchase this property?”

“Mhm.”

You really aren’t afraid of death… The old agent had already expended all his kindness and care for that day, and stopped trying to persuade him otherwise, asking: “And these two are…”

Xu Qi’an joked with him: “What do you think?”

That shut the old agent up, as he felt himself being thrown into a difficult situation. *Mother and sisters? No, they wouldn’t be so young. Moreover, they didn’t have any of the mother-son dynamic that would have otherwise been the case.*

A newlywed couple? Mn, that young woman could be this Master’s wife, and the pretty older woman his mother in law… but what about that girl in the yellow dress from yesterday?

Although old agent’s perceptions were shrewd, they still could not tell him what relationship they had.

“The older woman is my Aunt, the two younger ones are my younger sisters.” As Xu Qi’an finished his sentence, he saw shock appear on the old agent’s face. Laughing, he asked: “What’s up?”

The old agent shook his head, internally still processing why someone would bring their Aunt and sisters over when buying a house. After all, the “aunt” here would be his uncle’s wife, part of the clan yes, but not direct family. He’d never seen someone bring their auntie and sisters to a house viewing before.

...

Even though Auntie’s mouth was full of complaint and dirt, making the house out to be a falling-down shack, internally she was very pleased. It was also a three-tier courtyard house, however it was much larger than the Xu House in the outer city, and the former’s build and quality was incomparable.

The Xu House was set up like a commoner’s house, nothing like this high-end flamboyant place. If one were to make a comparison, it would be like a rural homestead compared to a city villa.

Even though they were all multi-room large detached houses, but the latter was on a different class entirely.

They spent an hour meticulously inspecting the entire home. Auntie and Xu Lingyue were all very excited, the latter had even secretly decided on her own room.

Auntie hesitantly asked: "For this place, is five thousand taels not a little low?"

Her nit-picking was all in an effort to push down the price, but during the viewing, she suddenly realised that five thousand taels was far too cheap, and the sharp-witted auntie felt that something was wrong.

Xu Qi'an pointed at the well not far away: "That well was haunted - really haunted, Miss Caiwei and I verified."

There were two startled scrams, as Xu Lingyue and Auntie both fled behind Xu Qi'an, the former tightly grasping his sleeve hem.

Haunted?

Xu Lingyin was also very scared, running over to hide under big brother's legs, before looking to the well, both scared and starting to drool slightly.

Auntie's delicate face turned quite pale, as she didn't want to stay one moment longer: "We're not buying this place, we're going home."

Grabbing her daughter's hand, she walked quickly out of the house. Due to her speed, her figure swayed to and fro.

The old agent made a pained expression towards Xu Qi'an: "Is sir merely making sport of me?"

Xu Qi'an waved his hand: "Bollocks, we're paying the deposit."

He didn't say that he'd already dealt with the ghost, afraid that the estate broker would immediately up their price. Before the contract was signed, this was still a haunted house.

The carriage stopped outside the brokers. Within sat Auntie and the two sisters. After hearing Xu Qi'an had gone to pay the deposit, Auntie was very angry.

"I'm certainly not going to live there, he can go live in a haunted house on his own! The little rascal just doesn't want to let us three women off lightly." Auntie huffed.

"Big brother isn't that type of person." Xu Lingyue grabbed her mother's hand.

As they talked, Xu Qi'an came out, and hopped into the driver's seat. Opening the curtain, he stuck in his head: "It's nearly noon, let's go to Guiyuelou for lunch."

Auntie turned her head away.

Xu Qi'an explained: "The ghost in the house has already been dealt with. If you don't believe me, will you believe a Sitianjian Arcanist?"

Xu Lingyue nodded sweetly.

Auntie was not fully convinced, as she stared at Xu Qi'an: "Really?"

"Why would I lie to Auntie?"

They came to the Guiyuelou, and booked a private room. Xu Qi'an took out his little jade mirror, and messaged: 【THREE: TWO, I remember you saying that you are investigating who is behind the banditry woes of Yunzhou.】

As soon as he finished writing, he put the mirror face down on the table, and focused on his food. After a little while, he got a notification.

【TWO: Yes, in the process of rooting out bandits, I discovered that many of the camps had many supply wagons, nothing that regular mountain bandits could get their hands on. I suspect that there's a power that's helping them.】

Xu Qi'an nodded slightly. Heavy wagons meant military supplies, including armour, arms, et cetera.

This topic of conversation caught number Four's interest. As an ex-official of the Great Feng, he paid quite a bit of mind to the political situation of the country.

【FOUR: You can see if there's a lead to be had from the Yunzhou officials. Right, if I remember correctly there's a prince in Yunzhou.】

【TWO: Prince Gui is a prince without any real political power, I've investigated him already, he's alright.】

【THREE: How did you investigate?】

【TWO: I sent people to spy on his manor.】

...this is called "investigation"? That's a little too simple... Xu Qi'an lampooned, replying: 【THREE: I know who's supporting banditry in Yunzhou.】

*???

Question marks arose in Two and Four's minds.

What intelligence has Three received? Why can Three always get intelligence. If it's about the capital, whatever, since after all that's his "territory", but there wasn't half a penny of connection between him and Yunzhou.

I've investigated this long and yet I still have no leads, how could he know who's behind the banditry in Yunzhou... Two knew of Three's character, a stately scholar with a high moral character, thus they did not doubt him, rather sincerely replying:

【TWO: What is it? Mn, THREE, if you could tell me who it is, I'll owe you a favour.】

【THREE: Heh, no need, I admire your conduct, this information is free.】

When relations are still shallow, then one must talk exchange, and deny all freebooting. After once or twice and a bit more familiarity, then one needed to develop personal relations, and reduce for-profit trade between them.

Free is the most expensive of prices, because the thing that is exchanged is better relations. When two people's relations are deep enough, then freeloading can come to the surface... no, how could it be called freeloading between friends? It's merely "helping each other".

This time, Two freeloaded off his information. Next time, he can freeload off Two.

【THREE: It's the north east's Church of the Warlock God, they are the ones behind Yunzhou's banditry. Mm, I cannot guarantee that my information is wholly accurate, but you can use for reference.】

Even though the Church of the Warlock God was not really behind Yunzhou's banditry, more likely than not they could not escape some sort of connection. By telling this to Two, Xu Qi'an had intended for them to go and investigate on this matter.

The Church of the Warlock God is behind Yunzhou's situation? Two stared at their jade mirror for a long time, before finally replying: 【TWO: How do you know? Where did you get the information from? Um, I'm not trying to pry things from you, I just want to know the reliability of the information.】

【THREE: That's alright. Last night the Nightwatchers discovered a gathering place for the Church of the Warlock God in the capital, they had close and clandestine relations with the Minister of Industry...】

He summarised the event to Two, making sure to keep out most of the details. After all, his identity was as a scholar of the Cloud Deer Academy, not a Nightwatcher directly involved in the case. He emphasised that the Minister of Industry was providing the Church of the Warlock God with cannons and weapons.

This is it, this is it... Number Two excitedly clenched their fist, messaging: 【TWO: This information is very important to me, it's verified one of my previous theories, thank you. I'm suddenly annoyed that Jinlian Daozhang didn't pull you into the Heaven and Earth Society earlier.】

【NINE: Proper matters should remain proper matters, don't start gossiping.】

Pausing for a bit, Jinlian continued: 【NINE: However, wouldn't there not be much point in the Church of the Warlock God secretly supporting the Bandits in Yunzhou?】

Not only on military matters, but also in what benefits could be traded, there didn't seem like much point.

I was thinking the same thing... Xu Qi'an messaged: 【THREE: TWO, you can try investigate this a bit, I believe that with your abilities you'll definitely get to the bottom of this.】

Just then, the professional lurker One popped out: 【ONE: The situation with the Minister of Industry reminds me of a detail in the Sangpo case.

【Gunpowder was smuggled into the Temple at Sangpo by the former Minister of Rites, and Baihu Zhou, using the latter's rank and position during the ancestor ceremony. However, who lit the fuse?】

【TWO: The Royal Guard?】

【THREE: Not the royal guard, I've investigated all the movements of the royal guards that night, those on patrol all lost their lives, and those not on patrol had proper alibis... furthermore, the Minister of Rites can't give orders to the Royal Guard.】

【TWO: Why?】

【ONE: This is the crown's secret.】

What kind of crown secret, it's merely that Emperor Yuanjing every month gets Arcanists from the Sitianjian to interrogate the soldiers... Xu Qi'an thought.

Suddenly, something in his mind fell into place, as two trails of thought was suddenly joined up with each other: 【THREE: What ONE means, is that the Church of the Warlock God's people lit the fuse under the temple?】

【ONE: mhm.】

【NINE: A paper doll.】

【ONE: How is Daozhang so confident?】

【NINE: Heh, the technique of using paper dolls originated with the Daoist sects, I naturally know of it well. A paper doll's power is weak, it is barely stronger than an ant. It thus can bypass a martial artist's senses, and silently infiltrate into the Temple. What's more is that a paper doll can at as the fuse to light the gunpowder.】

【ONE: This is to say, that not only did the Sangpo case involve the Yao, but it also involved the Warlocks? Then the Qi Clique must also know of this matter.】

【THREE: Surely not, the Qi Clique and the Church of the Warlock God were only business partners, not superior and subordinate. The Church couldn't have told everything to the Qi clique.】

【ONE: But one thing is for certain, the Warlocks and the Yao have relations.】

The Yao wanted Sangpo blow up to get to the sealed item inside, but what was the Church of the Warlock God after? It wouldn't have been Shenshu's severed hand, otherwise they would have conflicting interests, they'll start fighting with each other... Xu Qi'an thought through this, as he reached out his chopsticks to pick up some food, only to find that the plate was empty.

There weren't many dishes in the first place, and the mother and daughters had finished it all. Little Pea's face was radiant.

You're the same kind as Chu Caiwei. Xu Qi'an scolded internally, and called the waiter to order more.

After they had finished and left the Guiyuelou, Auntie and Lingyue entered the carriage. Xu Lingyin saw that on the other side of the street they were selling malt candy, and dragged big brother over by the trouser leg to beg for him to get her some.

Xu Qi'an took her to get some candy, with words like blades but a heart like tofu: "Malt candy is too hard, your teeth will break your teeth."

Little Pea was a well established businessman in the business of eating, and was not at all intimidated: "It's ok, I'll suck on it until it goes from hard to soft."

Hearing this, Xu Qi'an laughed, "If you're really skilled you'll be able to get it from soft to hard."

Little Pea could only admit defeat: "I'm not that skilled, can big brother do it?"

"Big brother can't, but a really skilled troublemaker can suck on a malt candy until it goes from soft to hard, then hard back to soft."

"Troublemaker? Then can sister and mummy do it?"

"I refuse to answer that question."

"Why, big brother?" Xu Lingyin flashed her innocent big eyes.

"Don't ask why. Lingyin, why do you always make big brother drive?"

Chapter 169. Making a Simplified Chicken Bouillon

The Ministry of Law

Two jailors opened the prison door, and struck the bars with their batons, shouting: "Sirs, you're free to go."

As they shouted, the jailors felt happy for themselves, that they kept to the rules. Every job has its rules, and one of the biggest unspoken rules for a jailor was: do not anger martial artists... unless they were death row prisoners, who had had their cultivation stripped from them.

And as for these high rank martial artists, they could turn their fortunes at the drop of a hat. In front of their eyes was one perfect example.

Upon hearing the jailors' words, the first reaction of the Nightwatchers was that His Majesty had already issued his imperial sentence. The reason they were freed was that his goal had already been reached.

However, leaving the jail, they were told they could sign out, and retrieve their uniforms and gongs.

The Nightwatchers were very familiar with this process, it meant that they were found not guilty, and furthermore could return to their offices.

"His Majesty has pardoned us? That can't be it..." someone muttered.

The Nightwatchers exchanged glances. seeing each other's confused looks. Everyone felt rather lost. Their visits to jail was clearly a result of party conflict, and as experienced Nightwatchers they

knew well the treachery and toxicity of party politics; given the opportunity one side will squeeze the other side all the way to the death, and would never let someone off so lightly.

Duke Wei sacrificed something to get us out of the Ministry of Law... Jiang Lyuzhong quickly came to a hypothesis, and looked at the three Gold Gongs beside him. They silently exchanged glances, and saw each other all had similar thoughts. For a moment their hearts all felt heavy, but then welled up with emotion and loyalty towards Wei Yuan, secretly thanking his protection.

Retrieving their uniforms, arms, and other items, the Nightwatchers silently left the Ministry of Law, and only on the road back to their constabulary did they have a feeling of joy of overcoming the storm. From the initial silence, they burst into excited conversation, someone even started going around their colleagues, talking about going to the Jiaofangsi again.

The Gold Gongs looked at him, he was a squint-eyed, thin man, and had an unctuous and devious aura.

“Song Tingfeng, you’ve just gotten out of jail, and you already want to get into trouble.” A Bronze Gong beside him said disapprovingly.

“What do you know, my boss is squeaky clean and yet he also got arrested, no matter if you’re corrupt or not, they’ll get ya anyway. The only thing that matters is if the people above us want to get you or not.” That squint-eyed Bronze Gong was overflowing with words.

He’s not dumb... the Gold Gongs thought.

“Well if Xu Ningyan wants to go, then we’ll go.”

Jiang Lyuzhong’s eyes lit up, as he said to his colleagues with a laugh: “Ningyan is the Jiaofangsi’s pet, the oirans fight after him. Earlier when Yang Yan and I took them to the Jiaofangsi for drinks, what a lad... apart from Fuxiang, there were four other oirans present.”

Under the questioning gazes of the other three Gold Gongs, the carefree feeling Jiang Lyuzhong rubbed the corners of his eyes, laughing: “The oirans of the Jiaofangsi certainly live up to their name, it made me feel like I was young again.”

The three Gold Gongs could not hide their admiration.

Even though none of them lacked in women, the Jiaofangsi’s oirans were not available for the Gold Gongs to enjoy with abandon. This was not to say that the Gold Gongs lacked influence, but rather the Jiaofangsi was controlled by the ministry of Rites, the power of the Nightwatchers did not work there.

The Gold Gongs could also could not demand an oiran serve them during drinking games — they would most certainly be refused. And in that case they couldn’t cause a ruckus, because the Ministry of Rites would love them to cause a scene.

Returning to the constabulary, the four Gold Gongs went first to the Tower of Noble Spirit, to hear Wei Yuan’s teachings and express their loyalty.

“Good, we can use this opportunity to rid the constabulary of its malignant trends, control well your subordinates.” Wei Yuan said.

The four Gold Gongs lowered their heads, and heeded his command.

Wei Yuan nodded in satisfaction, “The reason you were able to get out this time was not because of me, you need to thank someone else.”

Someone else? His Majesty was feeling especially gracious that day? The four Gold Gongs began guessing.

“It’s Xu Qi’an.” Wei Yuan said.

Xu Qi’an? This answer caught the four Gold Gongs off guard, to the point that they were somewhat in disbelief.

Jiang Lyuzhong straightened his back, his voice deferent, “Duke Wei, what happened when we were in jail?”

Wei Yuan told them about the case involving the Minister of Industry and the Church of the Warlock God, especially emphasising the importance of Xu Qi’an within the case.

The four Gold Gongs left the Tower of Noble Spirit. Jiang Lyuzhong’s face was gloomy, his emotions low.

Another Gold Gong mocked him: “Jealous that that Bronze Gong continuously gets merit?”

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head, closing his sharp eyes, sighing, “Back then I should have fought to the death with Yang Yan to get Xu Qi’an under my command.”

“Bronze Gong Xu is certainly a rare prodigy, only his strength is a bit lacking.”

“What do you know, you don’t even know that he...” Jiang Lyuzhong suddenly shut his mouth.

“Mn?” The three Gold Gongs looked back at him.

“Can’t say, can’t say.” Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head.

“Oy, Jiang, are you learning from the brothel whores, taking your clothes off and shaking your arse just to lead us on.”

“Say it, what’s up with that Bronze Gong? It’s strange isn’t it, Wei Yuan has taken too much of a liking to him.”

“If you want to know, go ask Wei Yuan.”

No matter how much the other three Gold Gongs tried, Jiang Lyuzhong just wouldn’t talk.

...

The next day, after greeting Second Uncle, Xu Qi’an immediately went to the estate broker and bought the haunted house.

In reality, Uncle Xu wanted to look a bit longer, but Auntie and Lingyue were already quite happy with the house — except the ghost in the well of course, but they heeded the words given by the master of the house: If the Sitianjian people had looked at it, then there shouldn’t be a problem.

Auntie and Lingyue were fully satisfied by that.

The brokers were rather in admiration of Xu Qi'an's headstrongness, and were even somewhat embarrassed at the state of the house, and especially hired people to clean it beforehand.

After dinner, Xu Qi'an asked Xu Pingzhi: "Uncle, the house has sat uninhabited for quite a few years. That day when we went to look at it, the building was sturdy and stable, but some of the windows and doors were showing signs of rot.

Xu Pingzhi thought for a while, saying: "Half a month should be enough."

Half a month? We're not getting any master craftwork, why do we need that much time... Xu Qi'an said: let's just hire some craftsmen from the outer city, then get them onto shifts for the entire day, this way it should be done within a week.

Xu Pingzhi hesitated for a moment: "Why the outer city, the craftsmanship of the inner city is much better."

"Because the craftsmen of the outer city are cheaper. Also, they don't know the house is haunted, they can happily live inside."

You're really unscrupulous... the whole family thought.

The task of hiring carpenters was given to Xu Pingzhi, Xu Qi'an was still wet behind the years, and lacked the experience to do it properly. Uncle Xu was old and experienced with the capital, he was the most reliable for the job.

...

This rest day, Xu Qi'an rode his horse to the market, and from a few sellers whom he had built good relations with purchased two wicker baskets of shiitake mushrooms.

With this, he planned to honour two promises that he had made: One, to help Chu Caiwei advance to a sixth rank Arcanist; Two, to make noodles for her to eat.

His goal was very clear: to make a simplified version of chicken boullion.

In the past, Xu Qi'an had seen a video made by a famous cooking content creator — not one of those trash ones, someone that actually does the real thing.

This creator collected many different ancient recipes, and followed them to cook various ancient dishes, yet he discovered that these ancient recipes weren't actually as delicious as he had hoped.

In the end he found out that the biggest difference between modern and ancient recipes was not the cooking methods, but rather the development and availability of seasonings.

After coming to this world, Xu Qi'an felt in much agreement with this perspective. Whilst the cooking skills of the lead chef of Guiyuelou is excellent, normal family home cooking just felt rather bland, even if the Xu family always had a supply of meat stock.

"The appearance of MSG was a great culinary revolution in human history..." Xu Qi'an threw the two baskets of shiitake into a large pot to soak.

Afterwards, he vaulted the wall into the main dwelling, nicked an old hen and slaughtered it, putting the chicken on the small stove to stew.

He then washed the now rehydrated mushrooms, drained them, and then threw them into a different pot to stew.

Xu Qi'an didn't plan to make MSG, because he lacked the relevant knowledge and experience. He only knew that Monosodium Glutamate itself could be extracted for fermenting grains, or kelp.

...though isn't the result of fermenting grain alcohol? Xu Qi'an muttered internally.

As for kelp this idea was struck off immediately. The reason was simple: the costs were too great.

The Capital of Feng was situated in the central plains, far from the sea. Even though there were trade from the sea through the rivers, ocean products in the capital were still luxuries limited to the purview of aristocrats and wealthy merchants.

If I wanted to use kelp to make MSG, I'd need so much seaweed that even bankrupting the entire family would get me hardly any.

Thus Xu Qi'an decided to use chicken bouillon to replace MSG. When he was younger, they had used MSG, but one day, Totole Chicken Bouillon^[^1] arrived to their household, and mother never used plain MSG again.

He was curious however, as to how this tub of yellowish looking grains could come to replace MSG, and thus looked carefully at the label.

The main ingredient in this chicken bouillon was guanosine monophosphate, or guanylic acid, a chemical that could rival monosodium glutamate in amplifying the umami in foods. And this guanyic acid occurred naturally in large amounts in shiitake mushrooms.

Time passed second by second, and several times the pots were refilled with water. The mushrooms and chicken were slowly boiled softer and softer, and a unique savoury smell filled the small kitchen.

Xu Qi'an took the shiitake out of the water, leaving a thick liquid in the pot. The cooked shiitake were laid out onto a cheese cloth, and he squeezed them tightly, extracting every last drop of the thick mushroom broth. After a few rounds of this, the shiitake in the cloth were as dry as a bone, looking like they had been emptied of all vitality.

Afterwards he combined the concentrated chicken broth with the mushroom stock, and also crushed the boiled chicken meat and bones into a paste, combining it well with the liquid.

Then, he waited until the liquid had dried off, leaving only the residue, and then grinded the solid into a powder. Thus, his simplified version of chicken bouillon was complete.

After finishing everything, Xu Qi'an looked at the sky — it was already dusk.

At this time, the cooks would be busy making dinner, it was perfect opportunity for him to test his invention, the pride of a 21st century underachieving student.

He would get feedback from uncle and auntie.

I have a feeling, that tonight Xu Lingyin will eat ten bowls... The corners of Xu Qi'an's mouth curled, as with a light heart he made some into a thick stock, and took it over into the main house.

Chapter 170. Not bad, now go...

In the kitchen, several cooks were running left and right, washing and chopping vegetables, tending to the fire and cooking, talking and making that evening's dinner.

"Soon we'll go live in the inner city," the cook chopping vegetables laughed.

All the common people of the capital had an attraction to the inner city. The inner city was far better than the outer city, there were practically no slums or other areas of poor repair, young women can go out onto the streets alone without feeling fear. They could even go into the small back alleys of the inner city — though this should probably not be encouraged.

"Dalang really has made a lot, I heard the madam say that that house cost five thousand taels." The cook washing the vegetables carried on the conversation.

"Five thousand taels? That's not much more than our house here." The one tending to the fire said.

"What do you know," the vegetable washer exclaimed, "I heard the madam say, that that house was worth at least seven thousand taels, far above our current place."

As to why they had only spent five thousand taels, this was clearly just natural talent on the part of Xu Qi'an. He was, after all, a Nightwatcher, he should easily be able to buy a house on the cheap.

"Madam said to me that after a few more days, she'll take us all over. Let me tell you, the inner city is really posh."

In the outer city lived much of the bottom rungs of society, who almost never had opportunity to venture further in. If one was not in a carriage or on horseback, and just on their own two legs, to go into the inner city from the outer one could take three or four hours. If one were to leave after lunch, then they would arrive by sundown.

The servants and maids in the manor were looking forward to the impending move to the inner city, and this morale boost had stepped up their eagerness to work, lest they risk dismissal. Except for Lü'e, who had been sold into the Xu manor since she was small, and also the maids that Xu Dalang could sleep with, everyone else had rolling contracts.

"I've discovered something..." the vegetable chopper suddenly butted back into the conversation. After the other two cooks had turned to look, she said in a low tone:

"I've discovered that madam likes to show off Dalang more and more, he's always at the corner of her mouth, but as soon as Dalang comes back, she won't give him any nice attitude."

"Ahem, ahem..."

Suddenly, coughing came from outside the kitchen door, interrupting the cooks' gossip.

"Why is Dalang here?" the cooks asked in surprise.

An oily, dirty place like the kitchen was not a place the masters of the house frequented.

You're really full of old maids' games... it'd be a wonder if Auntie did show off about me... Xu Qi'an, bowl of stock in hand, nodded, saying:

“I’ve made a secret recipe, so I’m coming to help you cook.”

Xu Qi’an looked around the room. The kitchen could not be said to be dirty, but it was certainly not clean, as after all years of oil and smoke had formed a layer on the walls and stoves that could not be cleaned.

However, as long as the bowls, plates, pots and pans were thoroughly clean, then there were no problems.

“What’s this?” The cooks’ eyes fell on the bowl in his hand, and the thick something within.

“It’s good, don’t look at it, it’s a secret recipe.” Xu Qi’an turned slightly, hiding his treasure from the cooks.

They didn’t mind, and continued in their work. If Dalang wanted to stay he could stay; he was the master, and they were merely just servants, since when could servants order around their masters? Furthermore, whenever the madam would argue with him, she would be rolling her eyes in anger.

Except for the Master of the house, there was perhaps only the second son who could speak a torrent that could actually argue with him.

Xu Qi’an stood to one side, watching. The first pan contained bamboo shoots and fried pork, and when the cook was tossing it, he added a small spoon of his “chicken bouillon” into it. He then tasted some, nodding slightly.

The savouriness of the dish was significantly improved, yet it could not compare to the real thing.

Guanylic acid and monosodium glutamate are meant to complement one another... if I want to reach the flavours of my past life, I’d need to make proper MSG... Xu Qi’an was nonetheless satisfied, though.

Seeing this, the cook took a pair of chopsticks, and also tasted some, chewing carefully.

Her eyes suddenly became wide, as she forgot to continue tossing.

The flavour she tasted was both familiar and new. There was the flavour of chicken, yet chicken could not be this savoury. To raise the umami of this dish by so much with such a small spoon, no stock could do this.

Xu Qi’an glanced at her, before snatching the spatula out of her hand and continued stirring, lest the dish be burnt.

“Is it... it’s tasty?” the other two cooks noticed her expression.

“It’s... it’s so tasty, I’ve never eaten such savoury food...” the one cooking said with excitement.

...

In the main hall, Xu Lingyue picked up some rice, and looked around, asking: “Where’s big brother?”

Normally at this time big brother would already be at the table waiting for the start of the meal, maybe playing around a bit with Xu Lingyin, or arguing with Auntie, furthering their bad relations.

“Today is rest day, maybe he’s at the Jiaofangsi.” Xu Pingzhi, head lowered and polishing his sabre, replied.

“All you know is crazy talk, dad, big brother doesn’t even go to the Goulán.” Xu Lingyue puffed her cheeks, a face full of unhappiness.

... Yeah, I used to think so too... your “doesn’t go to the Goulán” big brother is suddenly an important person who is fought over by the Jiaofangsi’s oirans...

Xu Pingzhi exclaimed in his mind, saying: “He’s now refining spirit, he doesn’t need to remain chaste. Going to the Jiaofangsi is a thing any man does, who doesn’t...”

Suddenly feeling the murderous energy coming from one side, Xu Pingzhi without a change in posture or reaction changed mid-sentence: “Your dad and second brother of course don’t go, but Ningyan might have gone. The Nightwatchers have their social events too, there’s no real way out of it.

“Talking about it, none of our Xu family lads particularly like those type of establishments.”

Xu Lingyue believed his father’s words, thinking that her proud second brother and well-behaved big brother were indeed not the type of people to be attracted to the red lights.

She nodded, and sat peacefully.

“Mum, I want to go to Guiyuelou.” Xu Lingyin came out from under the table, giving Auntie a shock.

Auntie ignored her, as uncle Xu lectured his daughter: “Lingyin, we can’t go to Guiyuelou all the time, it takes silver.”

“Big brother took me yesterday.” Xu Lingyin was not convinced.

“Then go find big brother to take you.” Xu Pingzhi waved his hand, giving up on the conversation with his youngest daughter. This girl was too stupid that not even the Cloud Deer Academy’s teachers could teach her.

Auntie sighed: “They say the chefs of the Guiyuelou came from the imperial palace, their craft is unparalleled in the capital, if we could get these kind of chefs for our family, wouldn’t that be great.”

“Woah, that smells good...” Xu Lingyin suddenly said. Her nose twitched, as she looked out of the door.

A second slower, the refining qi martial artist Xu Pingzhi also smelled the extremely savoury scent.

A moment later, the cooks brought over the dishes. With them was Xu Qi’an, but even Xu Lingyue, who really liked her big brother was not paying attention to him, rather her eyes fixated on the food.

Glinting fried pork and bamboo shoot, sour hand-torn cabbage, yam soup, scrambled egg and wild garlic, stewed lotus root and lamb leg, red-oil water bamboo... as well as pig trotters cooked personally by Xu Qi'an.

"The food today is really fragrant." Xu Pingzhi said with some surprise.

He summoned them over, and picked up a piece of pig trotter, with crispy skin and tender interior and a dark sauce lathered on top. Smelling its savouriness that could make any person drool, he eagerly shoved it into his mouth.

"How is it this good?" He said in shock.

"You're being too grandiose." Auntie pursed her lips, and when the cooks had placed the dishes on the table, she picked up a piece of bamboo root. After chewing on it though, her pretty eyes suddenly became wide.

The dish was still the dish, there was nothing special to it, but that umami exploded over her taste buds, something she had never experienced before.

Usually when cooking, they would add at most a ladle of stock, and although there were different flavours of stock, they could not provide such an intense flavour, as the stocks of this era did not have any MSG with them.

Even if one were drinking chicken soup, or eating shiitake mushrooms, they would think it is savoury, but what Xu Qi'an had done was to take the essence of savouriness out of two whole baskets of mushrooms, how could anything compare?

Auntie looked with surprise at the cooks, light dancing in her eyes: "Today's food is especially different from before, how did you make it?"

Xu Lingyue and Xu Pingzhi also put down their chopsticks, awaiting an answer with great interest.

Only Xu Lingyin did not care, she only cared about how much good food could end up in her belly.

"It's Dalang's secret recipe..." The cooks waved their hands.

The whole family immediately turned to look at Xu Qi'an. Xu Pingzhi asked: "Where did you get a secret recipe?"

Xu Lingyue and Auntie also looked at him curiously.

Xu Qi'an's chopsticks moved as fast as lightning, as he explained: "I felt that the food at home was too plain, and Guiyuelou was too expensive, so I figured out something. It seems it's pretty good."

Uncle Xu nodded slightly, turning to look at the table. His eyes went wide, as he shouted: "Xu Lingyin!"

Xu Lingyin had climbed onto the table, and was pulling the dishes over to herself.

"They're all mine." She frowned comically, declaring to her father.

...

At 6 AM Xu Qi'an arrived at the constabulary, and did nothing until noon, waiting to receive the Bronze Gongs and Silver Gongs returning from jail.

Yesterday they had received news of the fall of the Minister of Industry from their colleagues, and about that case in general which ultimately decided their fates.

If Xu Qi'an did not butt in and contribute, then many of their fortunes would have taken a turn for the worse.

After getting through all of the talk, Xu Qi'an tied on his bronze gong, strapped on his sabre, and went on patrol.

"Ningyan, you haven't been to the Jiaofangsi in a while." The silent Zhu Guangxiao suddenly said.

Because I've gotten the perception that it's not me freeloading off the oirans, but them freeloading off me... Xu Qi'an said helplessly: "I feel like I'm nearing the peak of refining qi, I need to plan to try for the next rank."

Peak of refining qi... Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng looked at him in a daze.

They were also at the peak of refining qi, this was not the difficult bit. As long as one constantly did their exercises and cultivated, reaching the peak was only a matter of time.

What was difficult was to gain merit, in return for visualisation paintings.

That said, Xu Qi'an had only been in the Nightwatchers for two months, and he was already at the peak of refining qi? What kind of aptitude is that?

"Then you need to gain merit." Song Tingfeng said with some jealousy, before adding gloomily: "But I suppose from the Sangpo case until now you've probably gotten more than enough."

"Mn," Xu Qi'an lightly changed the topic: "I want to save for a couple weeks before going to the Jiaofangsi."

The Jiaofangsi was by far and away the best topic for their lively atmosphere. Song Tingfeng winked: "Then Miss Fuxiang will have to suffer."

She won't suffer, she'll just overflow, just like the one to my right... Xu Qi'an glanced rightwards.

As they walked and talked, they came back round to the constabulary, and were drawn to a tall and burly monk in a blue monk's robe.

His robe was somewhat tattered, around his neck were hung a string of heavy prayer beads, two lines of scars were arranged on his bald head, and his expression carried deep suffering.

It was Hengyuan.

Seeing Xu Qi'an arriving, Hengyuan's face lit up, as he came over to them with big strides, clasping his hands together: "Sir Xu."

Not bad, now go... Xu Qi'an interrupted him, saying with some exasperation: "Master Hengyuan, I have a public duty to carry out, please let's get to the point. This official only has a salary of five tales of silver, my wallets are quite bare."

As he talked, his gaze went downwards, seeing that Hengyuan's canvas shoes were already tattered, and two of his toes were sticking out.

So he's come to Ningyan for money... Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao looked at Hengyuan with not so friendly gazes.

Seeing Xu Qi'an's brisk refusal, Hengyuan fell silent for a long time, before bowing: "This monk understands."

Seeing the figure of the monk walking away, a memory suddenly came to the front of Xu Qi'an's mind, of the figure of his father, who had travelled such a long way to bring him lunch at school, only to be met with distaste at how he wasn't fast enough — he was also like this, looking lonely and downtrodden.

"Ugh... wait up." Xu Qi'an called after him, and let out a long breath, "How much do you need this time, just tell me an amount, I can't give too much though, I don't have much money recently."