

Nightwatcher 171

Chapter 171. Lion's Roar

Hengyuan stopped in his tracks. He turned, without speaking, and bowed to Xu Qi'an.

"I want to go see the welfare home." Xu Qi'an gave his request.

"Of course."

"Let's go together." He offered to his colleagues.

"Have you not got any money on you?" Song Tingfeng gave him a side-eye.

Xu Qi'an laughed, and started walking without replying. After just one or two steps, he felt a hard something under the sole of his shoe, and naturally bent to pick it up. Displaying it in his hand, he said: "Look, I have money."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao: "???"

The former stared at the somewhat dull piece of silver, and said gloomily: "I'd just gone past here and missed that, and now you get it."

In reality, you've probably missed several taels of silver... the corner of Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched, as he put the silver into his robe, explaining: "Master Hengyuan lives in a Welfare Home in the outer east city. I've heard that the orphans, widows and elderly who live there are not living in the best of conditions."

"People living in poor conditions are everywhere." Zhu Guangxiao said in a depressed voice, before sighing.

The three of them followed Hengyuan out of the inner city, and towards the welfare home in the east. Along the way, Song Tingfeng discovered something interesting.

"Look at this monk; when we walk quickly he walks quickly, always keeping the same distance, yet he's never once looked back at us."

Naturally, this was not because there were eyes on the back of Hengyuan's head. Xu Qi'an and the others all had the same thought: *What frightening senses.*

They deliberately increased their pace, and soon they had reached the east city. The area they were in was a poor area, all around were shabby and tattered small houses, as well as common people dressed in old patchwork coats.

Their faces glinted a sallow yellow under the sun, and their gazes were dull. The children here still had signs of life in their eyes, however their thin bodies and filthy faces, as well as the expressions they had when staring at people's purses, made one instinctively feel a sense of distaste towards them.

Xu Qi'an likewise felt a disdain well up in his heart, but not towards these poverty-stricken children, but rather to this environment.

In his previous life he had seen many photos of war torn areas; poverty, starvation, and chaos were the three constants there. Every time he saw such related scenes, he would feel a powerful sense of anger, because deep down he wanted to make it better, yet he was powerless to do so.

It could perhaps be called anger from inability.

“Look after your purses, even if they don’t dare, nor have the ability to steal your silver.” Hengyuan’s voice came from afar, “Here, do not show any signs of charity, else you will find yourself in an awkward situation.”

He did not explain what such an awkward situation was.

I know, if you show one sign of kindness, then to them you’ll just become a juicy fat lamb... is Hengyuan afraid that if we were to be like that, we would be driven to anger and harm these poor people? Xu Qi’an thought, as he said:

“I rarely come to these kinds of places, why do they not find work?”

“Many of the people who live here are refugees and wanderers who have lost their farmlands. Perhaps before they had work, but they could not stand the hard labour, and chose to give up their fields, and come here to find a new life.

“But the city does not have room for them to make a living. Occasionally, constables would come here to search for scapegoats. That said, to continue to survive here, many of them are not above flouting the law.”

Master Hengyuan explained with a calm tone.

As he spoke, the four of them arrived at the welfare home, an house that seemed to have been there for many decades. The sign on the front door had long since had its colour stripped by the wind, rain, and sun.

“Earlier, there were government officials who came to repair the building, but I replaced the new sign with the old one. Being too beautiful and eye-catching is not good for the welfare home. Please, enter.”

They entered the welfare house. Hengyuan led them along, saying: “Sir Xu, this poor monk knows of your difficulty. When I asked you for help, I was not after money. I heard that you have good relations with the Sitianjian’s arcanists, so I wanted to ask for your help to find a white cloaked arcanist to help save a poor child.”

Passing through the front courtyard, they came to the messy back yard, and to a firewood shed.

In the shed was laid down a thick bed of straw and linen sheets, a basin for charcoal and a large bowl was placed in a corner, and on the sheets laid a thin black dog.

Hearing the commotion, the dog stirred, being unable to rise. It raised its head with great effort, and seeing strangers, its dark eyes instinctively showed an expression of begging and pitifulness, and it spoke with stunted words:

“Happiness... like... the eastern... sea... good luck... and... great... prosperity...”

The originally emotionless Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao suddenly froze.

Xu Qi'an felt as if he had been struck by thunder, freezing in place. He thought back to what Hengyuan had said when he had first saved him.

"This- this is... that child?" Xu Qi'an muttered.

"He only knows these eight words." Hengyuan gazed at the black dog, his face full of compassion, "I rescued him when I was searching for my sect brother Henghui. Because of the abuse he had suffered, this boy couldn't live much longer, but during this time I've used my qi to nurture his body, and just barely he's scraping by.

"But this is not good long term, his body is in a dire state. If he is not cured, then he may have not much more than three days. Normal physicians cannot save him, only the Sitianjian Arcanists can. This poor monk could find no other way, and so came to Sir Xu."

Song Tingfeng opened and closed his mouth a few times, before finally finding words: "Perhaps, death is a mercy to him."

Hengyuan looked at this Bronze Gong, and whispered: "Every day when the sun rises, his eyes are clear and sparkling. I understand the longing within; it's the most pure, most primal wish to live.

"In my sirs' eyes, perhaps he is as important as a weed in your back garden, yet even a weed strives to survive another day."

Song Tingfeng fell silent.

Xu Qi'an looked deeply at this "black dog", "I understand. I will ask an arcanist from the Sitianjian to come look at his illness. Master... if you need silver in the future, please come and find me."

At the last minute, he added: "I can only give at most three cash of silver every day."

Three cash every day? Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao's faces twitched slightly. After all, eight cash made one tael, and with Xu Qi'an's salary, every month he could only get four or five taels of silver.

And four or five taels a month was enough for a comfortable life even in the inner city.

Three cash every day, that's one tael every three, where the hell is he getting all that money? Oh right, His Majesty rewarded him with over a thousand taels of gold, that's alright.

Hengyuan shook his head.

"Don't worry, the money isn't an issue, it'll be just as if I'd picked it up." Xu Qi'an comforted him.

Only then did Master Hengyuan nod. He comforted the "black dog", then lead Xu Qi'an and the others back to the front yard. "Please can the two Sirs wait here, I have something to say to Sir Xu."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao nodded. One turned to tease the children who were watching them from inside, the other went and sat at the stone table, talking to the elderly who were outside getting some sun.

Entering a simple and shabby room, Hengyuan closed the door, and said with clasped hands: “Sir Xu’s vigour is deep, your soul is strong and your qi is abundant, are you thinking of entering Refining Spirit?”

How is he so accurate? All I know that Six is an eight rank Warrior Monk. I don’t know his strengths and weaknesses, yet he already knows me inside out... Xu Qi’an straightened his expression, “What teachings does the Master have?”

“Have you a visualisation painting?”

“Yes.”

Master Hengyuan nodded with realisation, “This poor monk has already left behind mortal things, and cannot return Sir Xu’s money. Originally I wanted to wait until you were at the peak of Refining Qi, and then give Sir a visualisation painting.

“Given that Sir already has such an item, then this poor monk will pick a different technique to give.”

In One blade from heaven and earth *I’ve already practiced to a very high level, the strengths and weaknesses of such a technique are very apparent... Indeed I need to learn something else to compensate for my own vulnerabilities.* Xu Qi’an felt his spirit rouse, as he replied: “Then you have my gratitude, Master.”

Hengyuan nodded: “I am an eighth rank warrior monk, I know nothing about the mysterious arts of the Buddhist House, but I do know a couple offensive martial techniques. The one I am best at is the Buddhists’ *Lion’s Roar*.”

Lion’s Roar? Upon hearing this the first thing Xu Qi’an felt was disappointment: Lion’s Roar sounded like it would be a technique that barbarians use, where was the *style*, where was the *cool*?

Number Six Hengyuan saw the disappointment flash through Xu Qi’an’s eyes, and thinking for a bit, said: “This poor monk can show Sir the power of the lion’s roar.”

As long as you don’t deafen me... Xu Qi’an nodded, but unable to put down a nagging worry, reminded him: “Will this not affect the elderly and children in the house?”

Hengyuan shook his head: “I will contain the power to just within this room.”

He stopped speaking, and Xu Qi’an saw the burly monk take a deep breath, and with his standard stance, threw out a punch.

This punch was nothing out of the ordinary, a DD grade in both speed and power, hardly able to do any damage. As those thoughts arose in his mind however, his ears first heard that deep and resonant lion’s roar.

└┐ ` O'┐└ *ROOOOAAAARRRRRRR*~~~~~

Xu Qi’an’s head shook, as he entered a state of dazed semi-consciousness. When he returned back to the world, he saw a fist the size of a wok poking the tip of his nose.

Hengyuan took back his fist, saying solemnly: “This technique shakes one’s spirit, and can freeze an opponent. When it is practiced to a high enough level, even the yin spirits of the Daoists would find it difficult to escape harm.”

This move perfectly fits my one blade from heaven and earth, like a hand in a glove... my biggest worry is not being able to hit them, but with the controlling effects of the lion’s roar, I won’t be afraid of my ultimate move missing the mark... Xu Qi’an said with glee: “Master, please teach me.”

At the same time, a question flashed in his mind: *Is this really only an eighth level warrior monk?*

Hengyuan turned and walked towards the bed, pulling out an old battered wooden trunk from underneath. He solemnly took out an illustrated book, and gave it to Xu Qi’an.

“This book records this method of qi control, as well as my own realisations in cultivation.”

Xu Qi’an stretched out to take it, but Master Hengyuan put his hand on the cover: “You need to return it.”

Why do you have to say so? Has the name Freeloader Xu also reached your ears?

Xu Qi’an nodded: “Of course, Master.”

Leaving the room and coming back to the yard, he rejoined his two colleagues. The three of them talked for a bit, before piecing together one tael of silver to give to the welfare home.

Bidding farewell to Hengyuan, they came to the entrance. Song Tingfeng suddenly said: “Wait a moment.”

He turned to run back, and stared at the old civil servant wordlessly, with teeth gritted and expression fierce.

“S- Sir?” The civil servant was rather afraid.

Song Tingfeng gritted his teeth harder, as he steeled his heart, taking off his purse and throwing it over, before leaving in silence, not daring to look back.

Those were the five taels of silver that he had planned to spend at the Jiaofangsi that night, and were a month’s salary for him.

“Xu Ningyan you bastard deserving a thousand cuts, if in the future I come again to such a damned place with you, I’ll change my surname to Xu!” Song Tingfeng kicked Xu Qi’an.

Xu Qi’an dodged, laughing coldly: “I don’t cherish you taking my name, your kids taking my surname would be enough.”

Song Tingfeng took off his scabbard, and ran after Xu Qi’an with it.

...

Returning to the inner city, Xu Qi’an handed the patrol over to the two others to finish, whilst he himself went to the Stargazing Tower.

“Master Xu.” The white cloaked arcanists all greeted him enthusiastically, and none stopped him from climbing up.

Xu Qi’an looked for a long while, not finding Chu Caiwei, nor Song Qing. He finally accosted a passing arcanist and asked:

“Where’s Miss Caiwei?”

“The eldest princess has come, and Sister Caiwei is currently with her and Master Jianzheng on the bagua platform.” the arcanist replied.

Big wifey and small wifey are both present... Xu Qi’an turned to his second choice: “How about Brother Song?”

“He got some death row prisoners from the constabulary, and is currently conducting experiments.”

“...”

Xu Qi’an gave up on the idea to find Song Qing, and asked: “Where’s the kitchen?”

Chapter 172. There are None Like Me Upon this Land

Xu Qi’an had little experience in the way of making noodles, and the reasons were as follows: One; factory made noodles did not taste that good, and two; anyone can boil some noodles, but making them delicious was very difficult.

In fact, ninety nine percent of people could not make a really good ramen.

At the very least I’m making the noodles myself, the enthusiasm is present...

In the kitchen, Xu Qi’an mixed up the dough and kneaded it thoroughly, an expression of focus on his face. Once kneaded he stretched out his noodles, and put them to one side, before cutting up fatty pork and rendering out the fat, putting the cooked pork bits in a plate to one side. He then used the pork fat to fry up an egg.

Putting the noodles in a pot of boiling water to cook, he then took out the small bottle from his robe, and poured some simplified chicken bouillon into the boiling water.

A thick savoury fragrance filled the kitchen, making one salivate at its smell. Xu Qi’an hadn’t eaten yet, and swallowed in anticipation.

On the other side of the tower, Chu Caiwei was just coming down the stairs with Princess Huaiqing. Princess Huaiqing, her long dress trailing on the stairs, glanced over at Chu Caiwei and said in a casual tone:

“How did you come across that haunted house anyway?”

Chu Caiwei paused for a moment, before understanding the eldest princess’s intention, saying lightly: “Xu Ningyan wanted to buy a house, and I went with him to look at its feng-shui.”

"I know that much, I'm asking, how did you discover that house?" The eldest princess asked.

"Princess, what do you mean, the old estate agent introduced it to us." Chu Caiwei replied.

The estate agent? The eldest princess's beautiful eyes suddenly flashed, as in an instant a lot flashed through her mind. She tentatively asked: "Was there anything special with him?"

"He was a fairly nice guy." Chu Caiwei fished out a snack from her deerskin pouch, and putting it in the middle of her tender palm, offered it to the eldest princess.

A nice guy? The eldest princess waved her hand, turning the snack down, asking: "What do you mean?"

"Xu Qi'an thought that that haunted house was cheap, yet the guy put a lot of effort into convincing us against it, fearing that it would cause an accident." Chu Caiwei happily stuffed the snack into her own mouth. Huaiqing was her favourite friend; she never competed for food with her.

Xu Ningyan that dastardly man on the other hand, with her merely showing some perfunctory politeness, he would have probably just eaten it.

"..." the eldest princess fell silent for a long time, before finally sighing. She was the one not clever enough here, she shouldn't have even attempted to get anything out of that girl.

Asking her about recent news was all good, but anything deeper than that, well that would just be like flashing one's eyebrows to a blind man.

Thinking this, Princess Huaiqing's brows suddenly furrowed, as she examined her good friend: "Recently you've been too close with Xu Ningyan."

"Have I?" Chu Caiwei was at a loss.

"Have you had as many dealings with another man? — excluding your brothers in the Sitianjian."

Chu Caiwei thought for a moment, before finally coming to a realisation: "Ah, yeah, he's always finding ways to come ask me to play."

Princess Huaiqing pursed her lips, as if deep in thought. Just then, she smelled a faint whiff of savoury fragrance, a type of savouriness that made one's stomach rumble.

"That... that smells good... did someone bring back something delicious? Mm, it smells so savoury, I can't have eaten it before." Chu Caiwei swallowed down saliva, as longing flashed from her large eyes.

...

"Plucking the stars with moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land."

Suddenly, a deep intonation resonated within the kitchen, making Xu Qi'an jump with fright. Turning his head, he saw that it was a white cloaked arcanist, who stood with his back turned.

What bloody mental disorder do you have, you've nearly given me a heart disease... Xu Qi'an made a stern face, and said lightly: "You've come."

His voice was light yet steady, as if talking to a friend he had known half his life, full of the echoes of years apart, of a time long past.

That made the figure hesitate a bit, before he replied with a similarly steady and emotionless tone: "I've come."

After he spoke, he waited expectantly for what the person behind his back would say.

What came over was a long sigh, and a hoarse voice, exclaiming: "I would have never expected, that after twenty years apart, you still like to face away from the masses."

Face away from the masses!? A simple phrase to be sure, but one which gave that white cloaked figure a huge sense of immersion, as if he was the strongest amongst all men, lonely and cold atop his peak, with none able to reach him.

Thinking for a moment, he replied lightly: "But even like that, I'm attracted towards you."

What a natural response... this king of posturers isn't letting down his title. Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, before sighing in regret:

"I always knew, that when these Nine-fold Golden Cores were done, would be the day you would show your hand. You still don't want to let me go."

"Hmph. Treasures are held by those virtuous to deserve them."

"Heh, Yang Qianhuan, have you been beaten before?"

Steam swirled around, floating around between them. In an instant the atmosphere in the kitchen felt as if daggers had been drawn, yet just then a crisp and cheerful voice broke the mood.

"What are you two doing?" Chu Caiwei stood in the doorway, looking blankly at the two of them.

Xu Qi'an immediately lowered his head, stirring the noodles in the pot, trying to hide the roaring torrents of awkwardness in his heart.

Yang Qianhuan was unmoved, standing resolute with his hands behind his back, facing away from everyone. He snorted: "Given that my sect sister wishes to plead your mercy, I will not..."

Chu Caiwei said: "Brother Yang, what are you doing in the kitchen?"

Yang Qianhuan: "...Oh, uh, I've come for noodles."

Chu Caiwei ran happily towards the stove, drooling somewhat, staring deeply at the pot of noodles, saying with a smile: "How did you know I hadn't eaten?"

Because I timed it... Xu Qi'an smiled: "I agreed to make you noodles, remember?"

Conveniently, the noodles were done by then. Xu Qi'an looked at the woman in the doorway in the pink palace dress, and asked tentatively: "Princess, do you want a bowl?"

The cold and aloof eldest princess hesitated for a moment, as her eyes slid towards the pot without her control. She nodded somewhat awkwardly: "Alright."

Having taken into account Chu Caiwei's appetite, Xu Qi'an had a lot of noodles to go around, and if it were split out between the four of them, would perfectly be a bowl each.

He took out the noodles, putting them in cold water, and then filled each bowl with some of the stock, before evenly splitting the noodles between them. Finally, he laid on a fried egg, and scattered on some scallion slices and those fried pork scratchings.

"Brother Yang, come eat with us." Xu Qi'an waved, thinking it would be a perfect time to see what he looked like.

Just as that thought appeared in his mind though, he saw magical formation runes appear under his feet, as his figure suddenly disappeared, a bowl of noodles going along with him.

Chu Caiwei carried her bowl over to the table. She first ate a pork scratching, and nodding in satisfaction, excitedly drank a mouthful of the noodle soup.

Her eyes suddenly flashed, as her taste buds experienced something they had never done so before.

Every cell in her body was screaming:

Delicious!

Delicious!

Delicious!

For someone who has eaten food with enhanced umami for the first time, this is indeed something hard to forget... Xu Qi'an laughed proudly, and looked towards the eldest princess.

The eldest princess ate very gracefully, but very quickly. Sensing that Xu Qi'an was looking over, she stopped eating, and looked back without any expression.

Xu Qi'an laughed dryly, before attacking his own noodles.

The eldest princess immediately followed suit, eating small mouthful after small mouthful, as if she didn't want to waste a single second.

In a quiet room, with no one around, Yang Qianhuan facing away from the masses squatted in a corner, slurping noodles with great enthusiasm.

That boy really is something, he knows alchemy, he knows how to speak, and his noodles are also good... thinking this, Yang Qianhuan suddenly froze. This type of admiration by the masses, wasn't this what he always wanted?

This boy... is my biggest rival!

...

Finishing up, Xu Qi'an looked at Chu Caiwei, asking: "How is it?"

"It's really good." Chu Caiwei's head bobbed up and down.

“This is my secret recipe, an essence extracted using my very own alchemical skills.” Xu Qi’an said, “And this is what I will teach you, to help you attain Master of Alchemy.”

Princess Huaiqing, who was just wiping her mouth with a silk handkerchief, suddenly paused, her eyes flashing.

“Is it hard?” Chu Caiwei was most worried about this project’s difficulty.

“It’s very hard, as after all I’ve only dabbled in it.” Xu Qi’an said. Seeing Chu Caiwei’s face fall, he added sternly:

“If you can’t produce this, then in the future you won’t be able to eat these noodles, nor anything more tasty.”

The young beauty’s big almond eyes widened, as suddenly a burning fighting spirit surged in her heart.

“You made this yourself?” Princess Huaiqing asked.

“Mhm, I put in my blood, sweat and tears to invent this for Miss Caiwei.” As soon as he stopped speaking though, he regretted ever speaking in the first place, how could he say that in front of his big wife?

As expected, Huaiqing’s gaze became that much deeper, as she replied with a hint of a smile: “You care quite a lot for Caiwei.”

“Miss Caiwei has helped me greatly before, of course I care about her.” Xu Qi’an replied.

“How much do you care?” Hearing that, Chu Caiwei was rather happy.

“I will rise to any request.” Xu Qi’an replied aloofly.[^1]

Then remembering that Huaiqing had also been his benefactor, he added: “And to the Princess the same.”

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Princess Huaiqing still had other matters to attend to, and so after sitting a little while bade them farewell. Xu Qi’an then took out his pre-prepared *Secrets of Alchemy*, which recorded the method for making chicken bouillon, as well as a general concept of MSG.

After discussing it with Chu Caiwei for a long time, Xu Qi’an said: “I have a matter to ask of my brothers in the Sitianjian.”

He planned to ask one of the arcanists to help save the poor boy in the welfare home, and the reason he avoided Song Qing, was that he was afraid that this “man-beast” concept would stimulate his insane raving mind.

Perhaps he would use “curing” in name only to study the boy, and even though his heart would be in the right place at the start, who knows what a half-rate alchemist would mess up with that.

Or perhaps he wouldn't even get a chance to conduct any experiment before being stopped by Hengyuan, and they would have a falling out.

"Plucking the stars with the moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land."
Yang Qianhuan's figure appeared behind them, asking: "What's the matter?"

Xu Qi'an glanced at the innocent and naive Chu Caiwei, hesitating: "Could I have a word with you outside?"

He came outside with Yang Qianhuan, and told the latter about the poor boy. "Brother Yang, that boy cannot survive more than three days, I wish to ask my brothers at the Sitianjian for help."

"Of course!" Yang Qianhuan agreed, "Why did we need to avoid Sister Caiwei?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head: "Why should we tell her?"

Yang Qianhuan nodded, "Good, you have the same high quality of character as me."

...

Late at night, the welfare home.

Hengyuan, in meditation, suddenly opened his eyes, as his senses felt something. He left the room, feet quick as wings, and quickly arrived at the back yard.

The door to the firewood shed was open, and in the dim moonlight, he saw that in the darkness of the room was stood a white-cloaked man.

Hengyuan stopped, as his ears twitched. Hearing the boy's steady breathing, his expression calmed, and he asked: "Sir is?"

"Plucking the stars with the moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land."
The white cloak said lightly.

What haughtiness... hearing this, even Hengyuan, who had long become a monk, could not help but raise his eyebrows, feeling a slight sliver of fighting urge.

This feeling could be summed up very bluntly as: I can't ever get used to your damn swaggering.

The white cloak snorted, laughing coldly: "Seeing your pose, it seems you do not know me. In the capital, there are those who do not know me?"

He's provoking me... this person is not good to be around... Hengyuan's brows furrowed.

The white cloak laughed disdainfully, as magical runes appeared under his feet, and he suddenly vanished.

Hengyuan let out a long breath, as he relaxed his tense muscles, no longer as on guard. He blankly waked into the firewood shed, and lit an oil lamp, inspecting the boy's condition.

Breathing steady, blood pumping alright, much better than in the day. Just then, from the faint lamplight he noticed that besides the boy was laid a porcelain bottle, as well as a medicinal recipe.

Medicine... white cloak... he's a Sitianjian arcanist. Only then, did Hengyuan realise that this man had come to look at the boy's illness.

He didn't know, and even thought that the guy was there to provoke him.

Hengyuan carefully stowed away the medicine and recipe, before suddenly coming to a realisation: that white cloak was a Master of Formations, an arcanist of the fourth rank.

I can't believe, Sir Xu managed to ask over a fourth rank arcanist to save this boy... Hengyuan's expression moved, shock coursing through him.

Chapter 173. Haunted House

Deep in the night, Song Qing, who had successfully sent the death row prisoner into the wheel of reincarnation, came out of the laboratory with bags around his eyes, intending to go down and solve the rumbling in his stomach.

He walked downstairs, still deep in thought: *No, grafting can be used on people. For example, damaged organs can be replaced.*

But, why can't it be more precise? Such as regrowing an arm... mm, this ability solely belongs to third rank martial artists. If I can discover this secret with alchemy, then my invention will shake the world.

Xu Ningyan said that the alchemy of living things concerns more minute elements... things so small that a human eye cannot see them... that's it! I can make a contraption like a telescope.

Telescopes existed in the Great Feng, as after the discovery of glass, the discovery of lenses followed soon after. In the army telescopes were commonplace, and were often issued to normal soldiers.

However, elite soldiers and scouts still had little use for them, as after one had reached the stage of Refining Qi, a martial artist's sight would be greatly sharpened. The more powerful one got, the more powerful one's senses got, to the point where a telescope would merely be a hindrance.

"What's that smell?" Song Qing's nose twitched.

Following the fragrance, he came downstairs towards the kitchen, and saw Chu Caiwei with a few other white cloaks together, seemingly boiling something.

"Hey, chicken soup, Sister Caiwei you're so considerate." Seeing the chicken in the pot, Song Qing's mood suddenly lightened.

"Go go go," Chu Caiwei snapped, "Xu Qi'an taught me this alchemy, if it's successful, then I can spread delicious flavours across the whole world."

Listening to Chu Caiwei recount the principles of chicken bouillon and MSG, Song Qing thought for a moment, before sighing: "Xu Qi'an is most certainly one of a kind."

Indeed, this was also alchemy.

Extracting pills from the essentia of medicinal herbs, forging weapons from the pure metals within rock, and what was in front of him now, extracting the essence of umami from shiitake mushrooms and chicken, this all fell under alchemy, this agreed with what Xu Qi'an had taught that day.

Alchemy included many varied fields, and its true goal was to extract those which one could not see.

“I still don’t really understand what he said about MSG, since he didn’t give any method, only going over its basic principles, and saying that it can be extracted from grains.” Chu Caiwei said.

“Big brother will help you.” Song Qing patted Chu Caiwei’s head.

...

The refurbishment of the new property finished two days early. Xu Qi’an asked for time off from the constabulary, and helped Uncle and Auntie to move house.

Auntie, in a dark blue silk dress, with matching gown, had one hand on her hip, one hand waving a handkerchief, ordering around the servants like a general orders his troops.

If she were a very average looking older woman, this attitude would be seen as too base, and not well liked. However, with the thirty-six year old Auntie, whose appearance made her look barely a year over thirty, her features beautiful and her body shapely and graceful, it was a different kind of beauty.

Xu Qi’an thought whether the young, delicate, well-featured sister beside him in about twenty years time would also be like her mother.

Or perhaps, even better.

Sigh... Lingyue is at the age to marry, I wonder whose family’s man is lucky enough to marry such a beautiful girl... Xu Qi’an sighed at the inevitability of marriage in this society, and continued helping uncle carrying things around.

Since they had hired enough carts, they only needed to make two round trips to move everything out of the old manor. As to a few miscellaneous bits and bobs, Auntie planned to buy them in the inner city — it was prime time to get something new.

Auntie and Uncle were the elders, and so even though the house was Xu Qi’an’s, the eastern master bedroom was still given to those two.

When allocating bedrooms, the usually mellow-toned Xu Lingyue had a rare argument with her mother.

A three-tier courtyard house was extremely large, but the core bedrooms in the inner courtyard were still limited in number, and moreover the side bedrooms were meant for guests or servants to stay in, and were not meant for the masters of the house.

According to Auntie’s intentions, all bedrooms in the western wing would be Xu Qi’an’s, as after all, he would marry in the future. However, Xu Lingyue stubbornly wanted to live on the west side, and live neighbouring to big brother.

And so as auntie said: such an old girl and still living so close to her brother, are you not embarrassed?

Xu Lingyue suddenly became desperate, and even started fully arguing with her mother.

Finally, she got her wish to live in the western wing, but Auntie also put Xu Xinnian there, and agreed with Xu Qi'an that once he had married, Lingyue and Xinnian would then move to the northern wing.

Xu Qi'an was initially not too happy, as if they lived too close, and he stayed over at the Jiaofangsi, his sister would find out, and then complain.

Xu Lingyin was put in Auntie and Uncle's room; little children often didn't do well alone in new places, and Auntie worried that her youngest daughter would have nightmares and not get sleep.

The eastern wing was incredibly large anyway, having three large bedrooms.

Xu Qi'an quickly laid out his own room. His old place didn't have many decorations and furniture, and so he didn't have much to do.

Leaving his room to go get some sun, he saw Xu Lingyin alone crouched by the well, face white with fright, yet displaying incredible endurance in not running away.

"What're you doing?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Big brother..." seeing that her strong and powerful big brother come over, Xu Lingyin sighed with relief, and looked at the well with some fear: "This is haunted."

"So what are you doing crouched there?" Xu Qi'an struggled to understand her intention.

Given that it's haunted, why are you not hiding far far away? Why are you crouched by the well?

"Big sister said that ghosts especially ate little children." Xu Lingyin said with a frown.

"So?"

She suddenly became shifty, jogging over and whispering: "I'm trying to lure it out, shh, don't let it hear."

"???"

Xu Qi'an looked blankly at her for a long time, before finally raising a thumb: "Those who know their food stand above the rest."

Everyone had their ideals. Xu Lingyin, even though she was so young, had nonetheless found her own ideal: in this world there is nothing that cannot be eaten, only things which I want or don't want to eat.

To use oneself as bait, just for the promise of something delicious... to have this willpower, in some regards, would be gifted beyond measure.

"Then keep on trying, when you've lured the ghost out, big brother will cook it up for you." Xu Qi'an rubbed her head.

"Mhm!" Xu Lingyin in both fear and excitement nodded vigorously.

It was just getting to dusk, and in a booth in a restaurant not far from the new house, the whole family ate the most satisfying meal they had had in a long while. Even though the flavour was not

as good as Guiyuelou, but it was cheaper, and close to the house, in the future they could come here often.

Xu Qi'an lay in bed in the wide and spacious new house, staring at the wooden beams above him listlessly, before suddenly something came to mind.

They didn't forget to tell Xinnian, did they!?

"Ah well, it's not my business, I'm going to bed."

...

The eastern wing.

Auntie had just put Xu Lingyin to sleep, and came back to her own bed, Looking at her husband, sitting on the couch and practicing visualisation, she suddenly had a thought:

"Husband dear, in the future when Ningyan gets a wife, will she compete with me for the matron of the house? Will she make us move to the western wing?

"I heard that daughters in law are all very toxic, always thinking of ways to fight with their mother in law."

Auntie was lucky; when she married Second Uncle, the elder generation had long since passed away, and she had never suffered under an evil mother in law.

But although she had never eaten pork, she had seen pigs run. Furthermore, this house was bought by the Xu family in particular, and so she wasn't happy with being called "mother-in-law".

Xu Pingzhi opened his eyes, and thought for a moment, "With your temper and personality, you won't stand a chance."

"Hmph!" Auntie was at a loss for words, and so could only snort.

Xu Pingzhi comforted her: "Perhaps Ningyan will marry a dumb wife."

Hearing this, Auntie thought that he had a point, and secretly prayed for her nephew to one day marry a dumb wife. Then she could bully her, and not the other way around.

"Oh right, we haven't written to Erlang yet. He still doesn't know of our move, he'll go back to the outer city and no longer be able to find us."

"Don't you worry about that, you don't know that many characters anyway." Similarly illiterate Xu Pingzhi said, "Ningyan will write it."

...

Two days passed in a flurry. Xu Qi'an's life was very normal, every day he would go out on patrol, cultivate, and would occasionally find time to go talk to Wei Yuan.

Due to the fall of the Minster of Industry, the interparty conflict had cooled significantly, and there were none at the moment going after the Nightwatchers.

That night, Xu Qi'an came home, to find Uncle missing.

“He’s on night patrol today.” Auntie said.

Or perhaps he’s gone to the Jiaofangsi... Xu Qi’an lampooned.

Uncle was a Baihu of the Yudao city guard. He would occasionally be on day patrol, and occasionally be on night watch, similar to the Nightwatchers. If Xu Qi’an were to be involved in a lot of cases suddenly, then what faced him was both night and day shifts at the same time.

In the past Xu Qi’an had, just like Auntie, trusted Uncle, all the way up to their “unexpected meeting” at the Jiaofangsi, as well as the method of using oranges to remove the smell of perfume. Now though, he understood.

A man’s mouth is a lyin’ one!

Although that said I don’t really have any standing to criticise uncle... Xu Qi’an focused on eating.

In the night, Xu Qi’an was suddenly awoken by a shrill scream. He opened his eyes and rolled out of bed, at the same time grabbing the black-gold sabre at his bedside.

Coming to the courtyard, he saw Lingyue’s maid sat there, candle and candle holder on the ground. Her face was deathly pale, as she pointed to the well mouth, quivering so much that she couldn’t speak.

“What did you see?” Xu Qi’an asked.

Behind him, the door opened, and Xu Lingyue, wrapped up in a coat, came out to see the commotion.

In the east wing, candlelight lit up in Auntie’s room, as she came out with Lü’e.

“What’s the matter?” auntie frowned.

After more people had come out, the maid’s fright dissipated somewhat, and she finally pointed at the well mouth, stammering: “The- there’s a head- in- in the well.”

Several shrill screams sounded in unison.

Xu Lingyue’s face lost its colour, and she shrank behind Xu Qi’an, tightly clutching his sleeve. Auntie also crowded behind him in fear.

“You- didn’t you say...” Fright danced in auntie’s beautiful eyes.

She didn’t say the “that you had dispelled the ghost” part out loud, the manor’s servants were not to know about that.

A head in the well? Xu Qi’an clutched his long sabre tightly, and made a shushing motion, telling his sister and auntie to not be frightened. Slowly, he came towards the well mouth.

The resentful spirit in the well had indeed been dealt with, and in that prostitution den the well used for raising ghosts was also purified. It wouldn’t make sense for there to be another ghost or anything similar.

It couldn’t be... could it? Xu Qi’an walked over with great strides, and went behind the well. Just as expected, little pea was sat by it, drowsy eyed and sleepy.

She was spanked awake by Xu Qi'an, and as she stood there rubbing her eyes, she muttered: "Big brother..."

"What are you doing here." Xu Qi'an thought of course it was her.

"I'm hungry, I came out to find something to eat." Little pea looked at the well, a conceding expression on her face: "It really can hide, won't even come out for a little kid at your front door."

Xu Qi'an reckoned that the head the maid saw was actually Xu Lingyin's, and for a moment he had the rare stifling feeling where he really wanted to lampoon, yet could not find the words.

"Big brother will ask the kitchen to make you some cakes." Xu Qi'an picked her up, and walked back.

"Lingyin?" Auntie was shocked, and immediately after her willow-thin brows became nearly vertical: "You damned child, sneaking out in the middle of the night to scare people..."

Only then did she realise that Lingyin was not in the room.

Xu Qi'an grumpily interrupted Auntie's tirade: "She's just hungry."

Even though that night she ate three bowls of rice, but hungry was hungry, no two ways about it.

Auntie no longer had the confidence to argue back as much, and with a snort, she put her hands on her hips, and with her carslan-blue eyes slashed a look at Xu Lingyin.

Xu Qi'an consoled Auntie and his sister, as well as the maids, seeing them off to bed. He then went to the kitchen to get some cakes, giving them to Xu Lingyin.

Little pea didn't need comforting, she ate and ate and just fell asleep.

Xu Qi'an gave her back to Lü'e, and returned to his own room to continue sleeping. In his half-asleep state, he heard a knock at the door.

"Big brother..." from outside came Xu Lingyue's crisp and delicate voice.

"What's up?" Xu Qi'an didn't open the door; it was past midnight, as a big brother he couldn't open the door for his sister, that would be against social tradition.

"I- I can't sleep, I'm scared..." Xu Lingyue paused, and added: "Mum also can't sleep, just then Lü'e asked, and mum told her about how the house used to be haunted. As they talked, they both became scared.

"Dad's not come, and they're too afraid to sleep."

What does that have to do with me, should we all sit down and play Mahjong through the night?

Xu Qi'an remembered back to when he was using Maidong^[1], and could deeply sympathise. Thus, he replied patiently:

"Don't be scared, there's no ghost here."

Xu Lingyue didn't respond. She hesitated for a moment, before saying: "Can big brother come accompany us."

Chapter 174. A Nearly Exposed Identity

"Accompany you?" Xu Qi'an's heart said: *No that's not happening, if it were just you, sure, maybe, but with that toxic Auntie of mine absolutely not.*

"I know it's a really tall order, with big brother having work tomorrow too, but mum made me come here to persuade you to come guard our door."

Guard the door... Uncle is definitely at the Jiaofangsi enjoying life, and yet I have to guard over his wife and daughters... Xu Qi'an sighed, replying helplessly: "Alright."

He put on his clothes, and just to give Auntie and his sister some sense of security, brought along his long sabre.

"I'm going to sit out here, you can go to sleep now." Xu Qi'an tapped on the door with a finger.

"Alright, thanks big brother."

"Thank you, Dalang."

From within the room came Lingyue and Lü'e's voices, soft and gentle. Auntie however was too stubborn to speak.

Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged, simultaneously cycling his qi, and practicing visualisation. After a while, his ears picked up Auntie's quiet voice:

"Will it come in from the window, what if Ningyan goes to sleep."

"... mum, don't say things like that, big brother has his sword with him."

Hearing that her nephew was armed, Auntie's nerves suddenly relaxed a great deal.

For a long time, there was no conversation in the room, with only the rumbling of snoring coming from Xu Lingyin. One could imagine her laying spread-eagled on the bed, mouth open, drooling slightly, deep in slumber.

After a while, Auntie called out: "Ningyan?"

Xu Qi'an replied grumpily: "I'm here."

Henceforth every while he would cough, and upon hearing his deep cough, the women in the room were no longer afraid.

His auntie and sister did have reason to be afraid after all, since this house was indeed haunted; that wasn't some old wives' tale.

But as time crept forwards, this fear would slowly be forgotten.

After another while, Auntie's complaining tone floated over: "Lingyue, don't lie this close, it's too warm."

"Mum~" came Xu Lingyue's upset, kittenish tone.

In the end though, Auntie did love her daughter greatly, and so didn't press the issue. After another while though, she suddenly lowered her voice: "Lingyue, you've grown so big already?"

Xu Qi'an's ears twitched. Upon first hearing this he thought nothing of it, but Auntie's tone was incredibly strange. Listening closely, as expected he heard Lingyue's embarrassed voice:

"Mum, don't make fun of me, they're not as big as yours."

"Rubbish, mum has already given birth to three children, but at your age mine weren't to this extent." Auntie said, before sighing,

"You've reached marrying age."

Xu Lingyue remained silent.

... poor Lingyue, such a young age, and yet such a large weight on your chest. The corner of Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched, nearly laughing out loud at his own lampooning, thinking that guarding the door wasn't so boring after all.

Auntie continued: "Living next to Dalang, when washing yourself remember to be cautious, a martial artist's eyes and ears are extremely sensitive, you need to protect against that."

"Mum, you think big brother would spy on me bathing?" In the dark, Xu Lingyue's eyes sparkled.

I will not, I most certainly haven't, don't wrong me... in the Jiaofangsi I always bathed together with *Fuxiang, I would not stoop so low as spying...* Xu Qi'an felt that Auntie was as venomous as ever, and even if she couldn't browbeat him to his face now, she could work behind his back, and break down the innocent brother-sister relationship between him and Lingyue.

"So Dalang not peeking means you won't guard against anything?" Auntie criticised her daughter, before turning her head to look at the bedroom door. Hearing her nephew's occasional coughs, she happily continued talking.

...

Xu Qi'an did not sleep the entire night, rather cycling his qi, refining his spirit, and when dawn broke, he was in as high spirits as ever.

Xu Pingzhi returned during breakfast time, in full military attire, without sour green oranges in hand. Seeing this, Xu Qi'an believed that he was indeed on night shift, and not at the Jiaofangsi.

"Lat night Lingyin got up in the middle of the night, and fell asleep by the well..." Auntie told Uncle about the events last night, "Luckily we still had Ningyan, if he wasn't there, and it really was haunted..."

As she spoke, the timid auntie became fearful again. She was merely scaring herself at that point.

Uncle Xu nodded towards his nephew, asking: "What was Lingyin doing by the well in the middle of the night?"

Xu Qi'an said: "It's all auntie's fault for telling her that if you deep fry a ghost it's more delicious than anything else. Caused a craving for her."

"Oh." Uncle Xu nodded, thinking that that was indeed the type of thing his youngest daughter would do, and so there was nothing to be surprised at.

After moving into the new house, Xu Qi'an could wake up later in the morning, and the constabulary was only half an hour's ride away, all in all very convenient.

Arriving at the constabulary, he went to Li Yuchun's Spring Breeze Hall for morning role call as usual, and after confirming that there was no other tasks assigned to him today, went on street patrol with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao.

The marketplace was full with a river of people, salesmen darted through small allies and crossed through the flow, shop customers came in an unending stream. The bustle of the inner city far outpaced the outer part.

Xu Qi'an planned to go visit the welfare hall with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, but his two brothers absolutely refused to go.

Thus he went alone to see Six, and upon seeing that the "black dog" child's situation was making a turn for the better, let out a sigh of relief, feeling as if a great weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

"Sir Xu, this poor monk has something I would like to ask." Hengyuan said with palms together.

"Please speak, master." Xu Qi'an grinned, mood light.

"When Sir Xu first met that boy, Sir said something..." Hengyuan looked at him closely, "Sir Xu said: this is that boy?"

"It seems that Sir Xu knows him, yet from this poor monk's memory he has never met you."

... bugger, the shock I received that day was too great, and my tongue slipped... Xu Qi'an smiled, making out to be as steady as an old hound, yet inside he was beginning to panic.

Six shouldn't be doubting that I'm Three right... taking about that, that day I'd picked up silver right in front of his face... mn, merely picking up some silver would not be a red flag, who hasn't ever been lucky... but Six is bound to feel that I'm not that normal, perhaps he's already beginning to attach me to the identity of Three.

But the identity of a confucian scholar that I'd made should have stuck deep into the Heaven and Earth Society's members. The first impression is the most important, the least able to be changed, so the most Six would be is suspicious... thinking this, Xu Qi'an sighed:

"I've heard Number Three mention it."

He did not explain further, leaving the rest for Hengyuan's mind to fill in. Firstly, Hengyuan was bound to become suspicious of the "superior/subordinate" relationship that Xu Qi'an had. Even though the Heaven and Earth Society was not a secret society, on its surface it was still made up by the Earth Sect Daoists, and lead by Jinlian Daozhang.

But the Heaven and Earth Society made of the earth book fragment holders was the real secret society. Three could never just casually mention its goings on to any subordinates.

Then, Hengyuan will investigate him based on this suspicion, and little by little, he would discover that Xu Qi'an in reality had a younger cousin, a student at a Confucian academy.

At that time, Hengyuan would think that he had hit the jackpot.

As expected, Hengyuan did not say anything, merely nodding lightly with a grave expression.

...In reality if my identity is exposed, that wouldn't be a big issue, as Number Six is a good person. Mm, really the biggest issue is that I've bragged too much online... if it's revealed that it's me, how embarrassing would that be. Xu Qi'an bade him farewell.

Returning back to the constabulary, Xu Qi'an received a letter delivered by a white cloaked arcanist, saying that Chu Caiwei had made a tremendous breakthrough in her alchemical study, and that Song Qing wanted him to go to the Sitianjian to discuss this.

... this quick? Xu Qi'an got on his horse, and rushed to the Stargazing Tower.

In the medicine lab on the seventh floor he met Song Qing and Chu Caiwei, seeing two pairs of heavily bagged eyes.

"Miss Caiwei, you need to take care to rest." Xu Qi'an's heart said: *or rather also become one of those productivity people.*

Chu Caiwei, with heavy black bags around her eyes and a somewhat lifeless gaze, seemed even more comical yet endearing. She replied tiredly: "I haven't slept in three days..."

Song Qing drew out a porcelain bottle from his sleeve, and gave it to Xu Qi'an: "Take a look."

Xu Qi'an took off the stopper, and poured some onto his hand. Within the mushroom powder were many tiny crystalline grains. He licked it, and felt a huge wave of umami rush over his taste buds, along with a slight burning spice.

"How did you make it?" Xu Qi'an was stunned.

"Fermented grains, along with honey, then purified..." Song Qing waved his hand, not wanting to explain further, "If you want to know the method, I'll get Caiwei to write a copy down for you sometime. More importantly, is this what you're looking for?"

Xu Qi'an thought for a while: "It tastes very similar. Is this thing toxic?"

"Not toxic."

"Then you've got it."

Song Qing nodded, "This thing is more precious than salt. If we were to spread it out, the crown would definitely want to monopolise it.

“All products produced by the Sitianjian are usually given to the crown to manage and sell, and the Sitianjian gets thirty percent of the revenue every year. I’ve talked with Brother Yang, you will get ten percent.”

The reason why he only got a tenth is that Xu Qi’an only provided the general concept for MSG, as well as a few theoretical steps. Some of those steps were correct, but others led Song Qing and Chu Caiwei down a fair number of wild goose chases.

In this new field of alchemy, Song Qing and Chu Caiwei’s contributions were extremely significant.

“A fair split.” Xu Qi’an nodded, before tentatively asking: “So, how much would I expect to earn in a year? Uh, obviously I know it’s hard to base it off any data, Brother Song you can just give a rough estimate.”

“It depends on how the crown decides to sell it,” Song Qing thought, “for one tenth, perhaps several thousand, to over a dozen thousand taels of silver? I’m only talking about the capital region, of course.”

As he finished speaking, he found that his hands were being clutched tightly by Xu Qi’an. This Bronze Gong said with heartfelt emotion and adoration:

“I wish our friendship will last as long as the heavens and seas.”

“You’re... you’re too kind.”

...

The imperial gardens.

Wei Yuan walked with Emperor Yuanjing through the imperial gardens, the warm sun shining down. This nearly twenty acre royal garden was home to all manner of precious flowers, trees, and other plant, yet the scenery in winter and that in spring were like two different worlds.

“Frost suffocates the myriad grasses, the flower and trees wither. Although this scene is a desolate one, if one were to look closely, it has its own beauty.” Emperor Yuanjing had his hands behind his back, sighing with some emotion.

About half a step behind him walked Wei Yuan, who after some thought, said: “Your Majesty, desolation has never been one for scenery, from ancient times until now.”

Facing this azure cloaked eunuch’s rebuttal, Emperor Yuanjing merely laughed, replying without much mind: “When spring comes in the new year, naturally will the flowers bloom.”

Wei Yuan seemingly was just there to argue: “When spring comes in the new year, the season is still young, and who knows when this desolation will continue up to.”

Emperor Yuanjing glanced at him from the side of his eye: “Then what does Lord Wei think?”

Wei Yuan replied warmly: “The blooming of flowers in spring is indeed beautiful, yet to no avail spring will fade and winter comes again, and that beauty fades to nothing... Your Majesty, take a look at this evergreen tree, no matter in spring gales or under autumn moon, under summer sun or winter frost, it still remains.

“To remove all the varied yet seasonal flowers, and keeping only those evergreen trees, is this the eternal Dao.”

Emperor Yuanjing restrained a developing smile, maintaining a cold sidelong gaze. The great azure cloak merely smiled lightly, his eyes kind, not backing off even half a step.

The ruler looked at his servant for a long time, before he finally spoke: “A few days ago the Empress caught a cold. Although she had recovered, her appetite is still not good, she has barely eaten in several days.”

Wei Yuan finally cast his gaze aside, bowing deeply: “What sayeth the Sitianjian arcanists?”

“Although she lacks appetite, her body is healthy, she should relax and look after herself.” Emperor Yuanjing said, “yet the Empress has thinned significantly. Wei Yuan, help us to ask after her.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Chapter 175. Chicken Bouillon

Looking at the azure-cloak’s figure, Emperor Yuanjing’s face was devoid of emotion, as if he were a cold hard statue.

The imperial palace complex was made of twenty-four palaces, which housed Emperor Yuanjing’s concubines and children. The rear palace, the Emperor’s concubine chambers, were not lively at all; Chuxiu palace hadn’t seen any new young beautiful women pass through its doors in over a decade.

Wei Yuan made his way to the rear palace, looking as if he had been there many times before, stopping outside the Empress’s palace. After the servant had reported his presence, he entered, and saw the Empress sat on a couch.

This mother of the nation’s figure had diminished somewhat, her once round and plump face was now rather thin.

She was an extremely beautiful woman, nearly forty years of age but still carrying the same splendour. Although she was no longer as lively and bright as her younger years, the years had refined and sculpted the subtle, mature qualities of her aura, making her grace something few young women could ever hope to match.

“What brings Duke Wei here?” The Empress smiled ever so slightly, looking deeply at the great azure cloak. His features were sharp, with a high nose, thin lips, and a deep gaze that reflected within indescribable vicissitudes.

The slightly whitening hair on his temples gave him even more charm.

Wei Yuan lowered his head first, “I heard that the Empress was ill?”

The empress smiled: “I’ve recovered now.”

“His Majesty said that Your Grace’s appetite recently has been small, and asked your lowly servant to come see you.”

The empress's smile receded, as she looked at him calmly: "He wanted you to come? Does Duke Wei not know that we are unwell."

Wei Yuan hesitated for a moment, before shaking his head: "Recently my public duty has made me extremely busy, I did not know that your Grace was ill."

The empress turned her head to one side, her voice emotionless: "We are tired."

"Your Grace should drink less tea, it is not good for your spleen and liver..." seeing the Empress show a hint of irritation, Wei Yuan quickly clasped hands and bowed: "Your servant will go now."

"Wei Yuan!"

The empress suddenly called after him.

Wei Yuan stopped in his tracks, but did not turn around.

"..." The empress opened her mouth, seemingly wanting to speak, but due to numerous apprehensions, ultimately said nothing. Myriad words were hidden in her beautiful eyes, yet Wei Yuan could not see them.

Wei Yuan left the Empress's palace, and as he stepped outside a breeze swept by, making his azure cloak flutter in the wind.

He really didn't know that the empress was ill, since the insiders that he had placed around her were all rooted out some time ago by Emperor Yuanjing. The empress, of course, didn't know of this.

This matter could not be publicly announced; it would only cause a misunderstanding.

In front of him was the tall Princess Huaqing, coming over with her palace maids.

She was wearing a white palace dress, that was embroidered with bright and colourful plum blossoms. On top was a long cloak, protecting her against the cold. She looked aloof yet beautiful, with a grace beyond mortals.

And entirely different from her mother in her younger years.

"Duke Wei." Huaqing greeted him.

"Your Highness." Wei Yuan greeted her back with a bow, simultaneously explaining his coming: "His Majesty heard that the Empress's appetite was not good, and was not well, thus asked me to come visit her for him."

Princess Huaqing nodded; her father hadn't come to the rear palace in a long time, only thinking about cultivation and immortality every day. Only when someone was ill, would he come ask after their wellbeing, but usually he would send someone to do it for him.

"The palace maids have said that recently mother has not been eating much."

"If she abstains from food after a long illness, then she is likely to develop a chronic condition." Wei Yuan frowned heavily, but in front of Huaqing he hid his worry very well, only expressing the care that a servant ought to show for their master.

Princess Huaiqing smiled lightly, seemingly not too anxious, and replied with with her crisp, cold, rich voice: “I was just wanting to summon Xu Qi’an, given that Duke Wei is here, Huaiqing can save my attendants an extra trip.”

Wei Yuan asked in surprise: “What does your Highness mean by this?”

Princess Huaiqing said: “Xu Qi’an has a secret recipe, that can increase the savouriness of food a hundredfold. It’s flavour is hard to forget. Since mother’s appetite is not great, this would be a good time to try it.”

...

Xu Qi’an dug into his own wallet, to invite Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao to the Goulan to listen to music. The two of them simultaneously listened to music, as well as carrying out life’s most fundamental task.

This was Xu Qi’an’s way of compensating them, especially Song Tingfeng, who had donated a full five taels of silver to the welfare home. Someone without a family and children like him, his daily costs only went so far. If he had no money to spend at the Jiaofangsi, he would be very blue indeed — especially around the crown jewels.

Leaving the Goulan, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao having had their fill of seafood were extremely satisfied. The three of them hadn’t walked far when a Bronze Gong on a horse stopped them, complaining: “Where the hell were you slacking off at? I couldn’t find you anywhere.”

“What’s the matter?” Xu Qi’an asked.

“Duke Wei has summons.” that Bronze Gong replied.

The summoned person naturally was Xu Qi’an. Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao knew their own position, and bade farewell to their kind and charitable colleague, continuing on with their patrol.

Returning to the constabulary, and entering the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi’an met Wei Yuan, who was sat by the table reading.

The great eunuch put down his book, and said: “I heard Huaiqing say that you have a secret recipe, that can increase the savouriness of dishes.”

Is Huaiqing that fond of gossip? Chatting about even small things like this... Xu Qi’an was shocked for a moment, before replying: “Merely small child’s play, nothing that would be sufficient for Duke Wei to think about.”

“The Empress’s appetite recently has been poor, and her body is weak. We wish to try your secret recipe.” Wei Yuan replied with a kindly tone.

The empress is Huaiqing’s mother, Huaiqing asked Wei Yuan to ask for my chicken bouillon... Xu Qi’an nodded in realisation. Seeing that there was no one in the tea room except them, he took out the small jade mirror and tapped on its back, as a head-sized jar fell out, only to be deftly caught.

Chu Caiwei and Song Qing’s hard work was all here in his hand, he only left them a small bottle of it.

Wei Yuan opened the jar and smelled it, frowning immediately. He smelled a savouriness that was so strong it stung the nose.

“This is called chicken bouillon.” Xu Qi’an said.

Chicken bouillon was a mixture of different ingredients, with monosodium glutamate and guanylic acid as its main components. These two together supported each other more than if they were apart.

Talking about that, “Spirit of Chicken” as it could also be known, was a deep and profound name with multifaceted meaning. It could mean, for example, the seasoning mix in front of them.

A spirit or monster rising from a chicken could also be called that.

And of course, the final meaning referred to something only men could produce.^[^1]

Closing the lid, Wei Yuan returned the jar to Xu Qi’an, and summoned a clerk: “Ask the kitchen to make a bowl of noodles.”

Xu Qi’an understood his intention, and followed the clerk out.

About fifteen minutes later, he returned with a bowl of egg and shredded pork noodles, putting it on Wei Yuan’s table.

Wei Yuan nodded: “You eat first, be my food taster.”

“...” There was only one pair of chopsticks, and so Xu Qi’an used the other end to eat a mouthful.

After a while, seeing that his small Bronze Gong had not died nor fallen ill due to the noodles, Wei Yuan finally began eating.

Xu Qi’an joked: “Perhaps the poison was put on the chopsticks.”

Wei Yuan paused for a moment, before angrily saying: “Get out.”

Xu Qi’an did not get out, merely smirking. Having interacted with Daddy Wei for so long, he knew that Wei Yuan was not someone that was really quick to anger, he was scarily proficient at maintaining his temperament.

As expected, Wei Yuan did not pay him any more mind, and concentrated on eating.

Chewing the springy noodles, he was somewhat caught off guard by their texture, and simultaneously felt the impact of someone tasting MSG-enhanced food for the first time. When he drank a mouthful of soup though, his eyes lit up.

“How is it?” Xu Qi’an asked expectantly.

“Many chefs have poured blood, sweat and tears into their art, and yet cannot make something with this flavour.” Wei Yuan nodded in satisfaction. The empress was used to eating the fine delicacies available in the palace, her refusal to eat food was not only because her appetite was bad, but also could be because she was fed up of the palace food.

Xu Qi’an could feel the praise in Daddy Wei’s eyes.

Wei Yuan took a small porcelain bottle from his shelf, handing it over. Xu Qi'an took the bottle, and filled it from his jar, handing the filled bottle back over.

Wei Yuan shook his head, not taking it, looking at the jar. "The bottle is for you, that is mine."

Xu Qi'an's expression became sluggish.

...

Dusk.

The palace maids brought up dishes upon dishes of the best food, as a dense fragrance filled the room. But the Empress's face was sickly, and she said with a frown:

"We have already said, a bowl of light porridge is enough."

The maids said in a low voice: "Duke Wei just delivered a secret ingredient, and ordered us to make something good for my Lady."

The other maid said with hopeful expression: "My Lady, please, try some."

They had already tried it, the flavour was different from anything they had had before. It was hard to forget, even after being a palace maid for so many years, and having tried so many delicacies from all over for their master.

Today's flavour though made those in the past seem merely adequate by comparison.

Hearing that this was Wei Yuan's order, the empress sighed, and with some reluctance ladled a bowl of soup, and tasted it with furrowed brows. A strong umami flavour exploded over her taste buds, as *gulp*... her long neck moved, and she instinctively swallowed it down.

Afterwards, the Empress proceeded to drink the soup mouthful by mouthful, without any sign of reluctance or disgust.

"We suddenly feel rather hungry. Fill the bowl." The Empress handed the bowl over to a maid, gazing expectantly at the full table.

...

The next day, just after six, a eunuch of the empress's palace brought a gold and silver adorned jade artefact to the Nightwatchers Constabulary.

Wei Yuan received the eunuch in the Tower of Noble Spirit. This eunuch and Wei Yuan clearly knew each other, as they sat casually by the table, simultaneously drinking tea brewed personally by Wei Yuan, and talking with smiles:

"From where did Duke Wei find such a secret ingredient, last night my Lady the Empress's appetite was nothing like it had been before."

Wei Yuan stared at him, asking somewhat nervously: "She did not resent the food? How much did she eat?"

The eunuch laughed: "She ate more than she had done ever before, more than even when she was well. This morning, for the first time in ever the Empress asked about the noon meal."

Wei Yuan smiled with all his heart.

Just after noon, Xu Qi'an was summoned to Princess Huaiking's palace. In a elegant and well lit guest room, he met the beautiful princess, whose breasts could rest on the table.

She was as cold and aloof as before, noble, beautiful, and if you didn't look at her curvy shape, she was like a solitary lotus on a snowy mountain, not a speck of dust on her petals.

"Today we had lunch with my mother, your recipe seems to have been improved?" Princess Huaiking said.

"All thanks to the hard work of Brother Song and Miss Caiwei." Xu Qi'an replied.

Huaiking nodded, "We are somewhat fond of that flavour, yet mother does not wish to share any of it. Do you have any more?"

"None." Xu Qi'an shook his head. "I gave a whole jar to Duke Wei, and he gave it to her Majesty."

In reality, he still had a small bottle, but this was not for Huaiking, this was for Biaobiao.

Not to say that Princess Lin'an's position in his heart was so important, but rather Biaobiao was too quick to make a ruckus, and however large the Emperor's rear palace was, news of this new chicken bouillon thing was bound to reach Lin'an sooner or later. That was of course fine, as Wei Yuan had delivered it.

However Princess Huaiking knew the true inventor, and with Huaiking's dark heart... by that point Biaobiao would be as sour as a crashed cart full of vinegar, and Xu Qi'an would have to bear much of the fire.

As after all, in Lin'an's heart Xu Qi'an had long since publicly assumed the position as her underling.

Princess Huaiking's delicate eyebrows frowned, "Yet we had heard that the... chicken bouillon that Duke Wei delivered, was only half a jar."

"Huh?" Xu Qi'an was caught off guard, staring in confusion at Huaiking.

Huaiking looked back at him, as the two of them fell into silence.

Chapter 176. Telling A Story

Wei Yuan is really being underhanded here... the price difference is a little too unreasonable. However, this does suggest that if the chicken bouillon can be mass-produced, I'll be rich beyond measure.

Hold on, haven't I just accidentally walked into the path of a wealthy merchant with concubines and wives galore?

The Arcanists are really professionals, if I had known before I wouldn't have messed around with this stuff myself, rather just give the Sitianjian some guidance, and take the profit from behind the scenes. Unfortunately, it's too late now... Xu Qi'an sighed silently.

From the tax silver case to the Sangpo case and to now, he had offended too many powerful people at court, and had already attached himself tightly to Wei Yuan.

Under this situation, all he had to do was cultivate, and help Wei Yuan in any way possible. The more stable Wei Yuan's position was, the more power he had, the better Xu Qi'an's life would be. He didn't have the time nor extra energy to investigate alchemy.

...mn, not that I don't have time, perhaps I will later. For now though, I need to focus on achieving Refining Spirit.

Huaiqing sipped tea, giving her lips a new shine, and said in a calm voice: "Recently the interparty conflict at court has suddenly died down. The reason is that Wei Yuan and Prime Minister Wang has joined forces, intending to conduct a purge on the various cliques at court."

"That's good." Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up.

Huaiqing shook her head: "Father Emperor has blocked it. Chaos in court is beneficial to him. The more the parties fight amongst themselves, the more he can focus on Daoist cultivation. If one or two cliques form a large majority, then the situation would escape from father's control."

The fact that she's telling me this, means that Huaiqing is seeing me as her own underling... though why do I feel she's too trusting in me... even though I've simped well enough, but I haven't exactly done it much... Xu Qi'an nodded, and agreed:

"Interparty conflict is a double edged sword, it can maintain His Majesty's position, but can also throw the court into disorder. The more cliques there are, the more heated the conflict, in the long term no one will be bothered with proper affairs, only worrying about this scheme and that scheme... any opposition would be useless."

Whilst talking, Xu Qi'an was constantly examining Princess Huaiqing's expression, if she at any time were to show signs of displeasure or disagreement, then Xu Qi'an would immediately stop in his tracks.

Otherwise, Xu Qi'an could use his knowledge as a keyboard historian to have a good conversation with this princess royal. He can build up relations, and get more benefits from her.

The well-read Princess Huaiqing narrowed her eyes slightly, and deliberately rebutted him: "Is not stopping all party conflict removing all unforeseen consequences?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head, "A court without cliques is a fantastical thing."

A court without cliques is a fantastical thing... Princess Huaiqing thought over those words many times, and her eyes lit up, as the corner of her mouth unconsciously curled into a slight smile.

Seeing this, Xu Qi'an continued: "This lowly subordinate has some shallow opinions, if the eldest princess would like to hear them."

Hearing this, Princess Huaiqing slowly sat up straight, and nodded: "There is no harm in speaking."

Xu Qi'an said hesitatingly, "In truth, the way His Majesty is controlling his court is not the most proper..."

He saw Huaiqing's eyes narrow, yet she did not tell him to stop, merely staring at him intently. Thus he continued:

“If he were to control court, he does not need so many cliques, just three equal ones forever in opposition would be enough. As after all a triangle is the strongest shape in any field ... um, marriage aside.”

“A Triangle?” Huaqing thought for a moment, before saying in realisation: “This shape appears commonly in the construction of the palace.”

The eldest princess is indeed bright... Xu Qi'an hummed assent, saying: “If there were only cliques, there is the possibility that they could privately come to an alliance, and although still like fire and water on the surface, deep down be in cahoots with each other. However if instead it was like a three legged cauldron, it would be exceedingly hard for the three sides to come to agreement, and thus the situation at court would be very stable, and easy to control.”

Huaqing thought for a long time, and as if linking something together, laughed lightly, before quickly reining her emotion in, returning to her aloof demeanour:

“The Cloud Deer Academy's great scholars say that you have a scholar's mind, yet we had originally thought that you only knew how to write poems well. We did not expect that you had such wise opinions. The number of scholars under heaven that could compare could be counted on one's fingers; the Cloud Deer Academy scholars' eyes are bright like torches, whereas we had underestimated you.”

No, they also just think I can write good poetry, you didn't underestimate me... I mean I'm a keyboard warrior aren't I, I command mountains and rivers with my walls of text, unbeatable with the sound of keyboard keys.

Xu Qi'an smiled reservedly in response.

“Although apart from the overwhelming number of cliques at court, there's one other fatal flaw there... Your Highness, please forgive me, this subordinate did not speak appropriately.”

Princess Huaqing smiled lightly, “We're all familiar here, there is no need to take so much care.”

Her clear, pond-like eyes gazed intently at him, expressing a great desire to listen, yet she did not continue talking.

Xu Qi'an was immediately comforted, as he said: “His Majesty can easily control the many lords at court, including their promotions, demotions, et cetera, yet he cannot control the base level officials and civil servants. The latter, especially, are the main offenders in the worsening state of people's lives.”

This matter seemed to strike at Huaqing's weak spot, as she immediately became serious, interrupting: “We have also thought long and hard about this problem.”

“Really there are two reasons why the Great Feng's civil servants' corruption has become as bad as it is. First, the interparty conflict in court is extremely fierce, and management is being overlooked. To put it bluntly, they only know to fight, and not to work. Second, His Majesty has cultivated Dao for over twenty one years, and the

court's control over its lowest level officials has declined seriously. What this means is that civil servants think they are above the law."

Princess Huaiqing nodded: "Your opinions and ours are aligned. We have thought about this numerous times, yet unfortunately have not come to a good answer."

You're a princess, what are you doing thinking about these matters? Xu Qi'an said: "For the civil servants, your subordinate suggests to centralise state control."

"Centralise state control?" Princess Huaiqing's tone unconsciously became one of seeking instruction, as she had never heard such a turn of phrase before.

"Although His Majesty in the present has the court firmly in his grasp, he controls a court which is divided amongst itself, and so needs to dole out appropriate political power everywhere. Thus His Majesty's political power is far too divided..." Xu Qi'an did not continue. With Huaiqing's intelligence, he trusted that she could see the meaning behind his words.

In the same vein, how could one change the current situation? One who ties the bell around the tiger's neck should also untie it, and so either Emperor Yuanjing would emerge onto the world and return to court, diligent in his duty, or he would abdicate.

This was the other reason why Xu Qi'an did not finish off his words. If he continued, then he could not avoid but overstep on forbidden topics.

The two of them continued speaking for a long while, and Princess Huaiqing gained a whole new level of respect for this Bronze Gong. Xu Qi'an felt likewise; not only was this princess clever, she was also erudite, easily quoting on the classics in her points, making talking with her strenuous, but very enjoyable.

Seeing that the conversation was reaching its natural close, Xu Qi'an bade her farewell. *I can't carry on any longer, there's not a drop left in me. If we continue down this rabbit hole then I'll end up debating the merits of socialism with you.*

Princess Huaiqing nodded, though her eyes showed a feeling that she had not finished.

...

Leaving Princess Huaiqing's palace, Xu Qi'an immediately went to find Lin'an, and very quickly she was notified, and he was given entry.

It was nine thirty in the morning, and princess Lin'an in a fiery red dress was playing shuttlecock with her palace maids.

If one were to say that Xu Lingyin was a prodigy in eating, then Biaobiao was a prodigy in playing. Her shuttlecock kicking was even better than the martial artist Xu Qi'an.

That fiery red dress rippled through the air, her waist twisted back and forth, and those slender legs seemed to have their own GPS, always colliding perfectly with the shuttlecock, kicking it back up into the air.

And so he would say, if this chick were born in the modern era she would be someone constantly travelling, constantly clubbing, a queen of the dance floor.

The dress in this era is far too conservative, she's even wearing trousers under her skirt... the didn't-manage-to-see-a-thing Xu Qi'an silently pouted, whilst making a respectful salute: "Your Highness."

Seeing that Xu Qi'an had come to visit, she handed the shuttlecock over to a maid, and then put her hands on her waist: "Did you not say after the case you would come here every day?"

"Your subordinate can't just walk into the imperial palace every day..." Xu Qi'an walked towards the pavilion, and Lin'an followed.

She took a towel from an attendant, and wiped her round face, ruffling up her originally delicately done brows.

"Recently we have wished to go outside and play, you shall accompany." Lin'an handed the towel back to the maid, and then washed her hands.

Xu Qi'an gave her a sidelong glance: "No."

Lin'an immediately stared at him: "Running dog."

The two of them started again to play the hawk training game^[^1]; Biaobiao tried to use her own charming eyes to overcome Xu Qi'an, whilst the latter would look back with a deadpan gaze in resistance.

As expected, Lin'an was the first to admit defeat, as her round oval face showed a slight bashfulness. She averted her gaze, and said angrily: "If it were Huaiqing, you wouldn't refuse would you?"

Huaiqing won't make me do anything as suicidal alright... to go lead a princess around is grounds for beheading... Xu Qi'an pulled out a porcelain bottle from his robe, "Recently I've come across a curious thing, when you add it to food, it can improve the savouriness. It's called chicken bouillon."

In front of Biaobiao, he was more relaxed, not always calling himself "your subordinate". The second princess never cared much about this kind of formality.

"Chicken bouillon, what a strange name." Lin'an giggled, "Are you out of silver again? We'll give you another piece of artwork, oh, recently we received an ivory brush, apparently it's really expensive, and I don't like writing characters anyway, so you can have it."

Xu Qi'an immediately said: "Your Highness, you're mistaken, your subordinate is not here for any reward, your subordinate whole-heartedly wants to work like an ox for you."

This kind of flattery was Lin'an's favourite, and she immediately became quite happy: "Then what do you want?"

"If Your Highness finds it convenient to convert to silver."

“You can have silver...” Biaobiao leant her cheek on her hand, and looked at him deeply, face full of smiles. It was as if those entrancing almond-shaped eyes were looking at their lover.

“We have felt really stuffy recently, and shuttlecock is getting boring. Tell me a story, continue on from last time — with that Journey to the West.”

“Of course, Your Highness, this time I’ll talk about the *Three Attempts at Borrowing the Plantain Fan.*” Xu Qi’an sipped on the tea served by the maids, wetting his throat:

“One day, the monk Xuanzang came to the Mountain of Flames. Its fires were burning tall, and he couldn’t even fly over it. The local god told Sun Wukong that if he wanted to extinguish the flames on the mountain, he would have to go to Princess Iron-fan to borrow her plantain fan. That Princess Iron-fan was the ox-demon king.”

“The Ox demon king? That’s Sun Wukong’s sworn brother.” Biaobiao’s memory was excellent, and immediately piped up.

“Exactly, thus Sun Wukong and Madam Ox had had a secret relationship.”

“What kind of relationship?”

“That’s coming up shortly...” Xu Qi’an glanced at the maid: “Go wait outside the pavillion.”

The maid obediently left.

Xu Qi’an was immediately more at ease, and he continued: “Sun Wukong came to plantain cave, and was warmly welcomed inside by Princess Iron-fan, yet she would not lend him her plantain fan. Thus the two of them began a fiery brawl.

“Sun Wukong turned into a bug, and flew into Princess Iron-fan’s stomach, saying: ‘sister, I’m inside you now.’

“Princess Iron-fan was in so much pain that she was rolling around on the floor in pain. Finally, she relented, and if Sun Wukong would come out, she would give him the fan.

“Sun Wukong said: ‘open your moth sis, old Sun is coming out.’

“Just then, the ox-demon king came back, and saw everything.”

“Who did he help?” Lin’an, vexed, asked. “One person is his sworn brother, the other is his wife. It’s a really awful dilemma.”

“Well, the Ox-demon king and Princess Iron-fan got divorced.”

Chapter 177. Business Trip

Xu Qi'an didn't stay at with the second princess for too long, as in the afternoon he still had to patrol. Thus, he had to bid her farewell.

Biaobiao was reluctant to let him go, saying with a frown: "Xu Ningyan, I can go tell Father to give you a job in the palace, and be our guard."

What future is there in being your guard? You really want me to be your workhorse... Xu Qi'an said helplessly: "Your Highness, your subordinate still has some aspirations."

Clearly, being Biaobiao's workhorse did not have the future potential of serving under Wei Yuan. Emperor Yuanjing spoiled Biaobiao, since not only was she able to pout and act coquettish, but also because she was cute and naive, and had no schemes in her heart.

As for Princess Huaiqing and the other royal children, they were always looking to push their own confidants into powerful positions, seeking any opportunity to do so — such as the Sangpo case.

When Biaobiao tried to ask Emperor Yuanjing to pardon Xu Qi'an's death penalty to no effect, Xu Qi'an had already seen what type of person he was.

"Second Princess, what strife is there, your subordinate is only a small Nightwatcher." Xu Qi'an's heart said: *We're not suited together.*

"No one else is interesting, they're always timid and jumpy when talking to me."

Lin'an pouted her small mouth, swinging her legs, "I don't like to read, I can't play the qin or draw, I'm bored every day in the palace. When I was little brother crown prince would come play with me, but now when I go find him, he just frowns, and always says he's busy."

What a poor princess, like a bird of paradise in a golden cage... but isn't Princess Huaiqing free to go in and out... Xu Qi'an thought a bit, and thought it through.

Huaiqing was the type of strong, independent woman where if you give her three thousand soldiers, she could command all under heaven. She was clever and well versed in many matters, and was scarily able. Out of all of Emperor Yuanjing's daughters, none could really compare to Huaiqing in talent and finesse. Lin'an however, was different, she was a little princess with a mischievous temper, with no thoughts or schemes, and was easy to be manipulated by ambitious and malicious people.

Xu Qi'an naturally automatically struck himself off the list of said people.

"The solution is quite simple; Your Highness can move to your own manor. The Imperial city is much more interesting than the palace complex itself." Xu Qi'an said.

Lin'an was a princess royal with noble titles; she had her own mansion in the imperial city.

"Then tomorrow come to Lin'an Manor." Biaobiao said.

Before lunch Lin'an arranged a palanquin to go to Jingxiu Palace. Noble Consort Chen had invited her son and daughter to her palace to have lunch.

During lunch, as the crown prince was eating Consort Chen's carefully prepared meal, he suddenly said: "I overheard from the servants that Wei Yuan gave the Empress a secret ingredient, which cured her anorexia."

Consort Chen laughed, "Indeed this is the case, it seems to be called ... chicken bouillon? I heard that after one adds a little bit of it to one's cooking, the flavour it adds was hard to forget."

The crown prince saw Noble Consort Chen's longing, "If mother wants to try some, son can go to the Empress to ask for some."

Consort Chen smiled: "I heard Princess Huaqing went to ask for some, but was refused."

Both mother and son felt a bit helpless.

Princess Lin'an looked at her mother and brother, and confirmed with them: "It's chicken bouillon yes?"

The crown prince looked at her: "You've heard of it too?"

The simple-minded Lin'an didn't ever pay much attention to gossip floating around the rear palace, and so she shook her head: "Today Xu Ningyan gifted me a thing, it was also called chicken bouillon."

She summoned a maid: "Go get it for me from my palace."

Fifteen minutes later, the maid, panting and puffing, returned, the small bottle from Lin'an's palace in her hand.

The crown prince first snatched it over, took off the cork, and sniffed it. What hit his nose was a sharp umami smell. Just by smelling it, he couldn't experience it's mystical properties.

"Get the kitchen to heat the food up a bit more, add some of this ... chicken bouillon, let us try it?"

The crown prince's suggestion got the approval of his mother and sister.

Not long later, the palace maids brought back the newly steaming hot dishes. The three royals didn't immediately pick up their chopsticks however, looking towards the maid.

The maid first used a silver needle to test for poison, and then picked up her own bowl and chopsticks.^[1] She tried each dish in turn, and after all were tried, the crown prince saw a clear reluctance to stop in her eyes. She didn't dare continue eating however, merely looking at the food with great longing.

After a while, seeing that the maid was fine, the crown prince hurried her: "Serve us a bowl of turtle soup."

The maid simultaneously ladled soup, and laughed: "Your Highness's eyes are sharp, this soup's flavour is difficult to forget."

The crown prince impatiently took the bowl, took a long sip, and exclaimed: "What a different flavour... mother, Lin'an, try some, you need to try some."

Consort Chen hadn't seen her son this happy in a long time, and felt happy for him too.

Lin'an had already made her move. She didn't go for the turtle soup, rather picking a piece of vegetable. As she chewed, she unconsciously reached for another mouthful, then another...

After lunch, Noble Consort Chen, having not seen her son and daughter eat so happily in a long time, was extremely happy.

"What a thing, but it's such a small bottle... how much effort would the royal kitchen need to attain this level." The crown prince sighed, and without batting an eyelid stowed the bottle into his own sleeve pocket.

Biaobiao's eyes widened, as she pounced over, clutching the crown prince's sleeve with an iron grip, her willow-thin brows almost vertical: "It's mine!"

"Isn't that Xu Qi'an your person, you can go ask him for more." the crown prince spoke sternly, "Let go."

"I won't let go, this is mine."

Neither brother nor sister could come to an agreement, and so they got Noble Consort Chen to mediate. Consort Chen scolded them with good natured laughter: "How old are you now, you're like children. If you want your mother to say, leave it with me, this is fairest."

"..." Both the crown prince and Lin'an turned their heads, continuing to fight.

...

I never knew that what Xu Qi'an gave me is so precious. Biaobiao sat in her palanquin, fiddling with the bottle filled a third up with chicken bouillon.

That little bit of dissatisfaction she had with Xu Qi'an had slowly evaporated all away. She wasn't really that dumb, when Xu Qi'an was taking advantage of her she was only keeping one eye open, one eye closed is all.

Since if she did not get him over to her side, this Bronze Gong would immediately rush into Huaiqing's embrace. He also knew how to speak well, he also knew how to play, and so Lin'an didn't want to let him go. Thus she was happy to give him some useless paintings and silver.

This small Bronze Gong's double dealing is really adept, I need to go confirm... Lin'an said: "Go towards Huaiqing's place."

Coming to Huaiqing's manor, they ignored the guards' trying to block them, and Lin'an with her pale face raised met that dastardly Huaiqing in the front hall.

The two extraordinarily beautiful women exchanged looks. On Huaiqing's pale, graceful face, her eyebrows furrows slightly: "What are you doing here."

"I heard that Wei Yuan gifted mother Empress a special ingredient, that cured her anorexia. This has spread around in the palace." Lin'an walked over to an antiques shelf, her red dress trailing behind her, and traced her hands around the blue paintings on a porcelain pot, saying casually: "Does Sister Huaiqing have any?"

"I do not." Huaiqing said emotionlessly.

“You really don’t?” Lin’an immediately turned around, her eyes sparkling, “restless and stirring” written across her oval face.

Princess Huaiking stared back, saying lightly: “Why would I lie to you.”

“Well I’m happy you don’t.” Lin’an — Biaobiao — took out her little bottle, and happily waved it around, laughing loudly: “I do!”

“...”

Seeing that Huaiking’s expression was not right, she was even happier, but to stop herself from being beaten up, she immediately took her retreat, her show-off performance finished:

“We’re going now, you don’t need to escort us. Oh, right, this was gifted to us by Xu Ningyan.”

Xu Ningyan... On Princess Huaiking’s smooth white forehead, a vein suddenly bulged slightly.

...

The next day, after eating lunch at the Goulan, the three Goulan-goers picked their teeth, and with large pompous steps came back to the constabulary.

They had an hour break for lunch, and so the three Nightwatchers wanted to return to the constabulary to cultivate. Today Xu Qi’an also paid the bill, though this time they were just there for food, and nothing more. A martial artist’s home usually didn’t have much spare food at hand.

After freeloading off Xu Ningyan for several days, Song Tingfeng felt a bit embarrassed, and seeing that there was a stall selling oranges on the street, said: “You two wait here, I’ll go buy some oranges.”

“Oy, I’ll go buy them, you wait here.” Xu Qi’an stopped him.

“Ningyan, you’re too kind, too kind.” Song Tingfeng maintained his stance.

“Anything else is fine, but I must be the one to buy oranges. If you really want to buy them, then you’re paying next time we go to the Jiaofangsi.” Xu Qi’an said angrily.

Song Tingfeng thus admitted defeat.

Returning back, Xu Qi’an received Wei Yuan’s summons.

Daddy Wei is liking me more and more... he happily ran towards the Tower of Noble Spirit, and after the guard had sent word of his presence, he met the azure-cloaked Wei Yuan in his tea room.

This great eunuch with his whitening temples and scholarly manner was just in the middle of drinking tea. He pointed to the seat opposite him: “Pour yourself some tea.”

Xu Qi’an, stomach full of alcohol, didn’t actually want to drink any tea, but still poured himself a cup nonetheless.

“You must not drink on duty.” Wei Yuan lectured. “Oh you, apart from having some sense of justice the rest of you is filled with bad habits. You’re flippant and insincere,

undisciplined, constantly going in and out of the Jiaofangsi. If I were your political enemy, you'd already be reincarnating into the next life."

"... your subordinate knows his mistakes." Xu Qi'an put himself in the role of younger brother — no, son, that made him feel much better.

"Whatever, the rivers and mountains are easy to move but a person's nature is hard to change. If a person was that easy to change, then there would not be countless myriads of them on this world." Wei Yuan had a very large tolerance of his underlings' misbehaviour, and so didn't press the matter.

After taking a sip of tea, he handed over a dossier: "You need to go to Yunzhou."

Yunzhou? Xu Qi'an sat up straight, and began reading carefully.

"A couple days ago, the Nightwatchers received a secret letter, which said that the Military Commissioner-in-chief Yang Chuannan has been secretly conspiring with bandits, supplying military supplies, and making profit from the trade."

Wei Yuan took another sip, continuing: "The second day after receiving that secret letter, the Qi clique moved with fiery speed, manufacturing the 'corruption case', using a large group of gold and silver gongs as their chips to force us to compromise."

The Commissioner-in-chief of Yunzhou is part of the Qi clique? No wonder the Qi clique seemed so determined to beat down the Nightwatchers, they were hiding such an important thing.

If I didn't have my dog-shit luck, then would Wei Yuan have been prepared to use all those Gold and Silver Gongs to exchange for the Yunzhou Commissioner-in-chief? Wei Yuan is really cold... right, Number Two had said that the reason why Yunzhou's bandits were difficult to rout was: the mountain bandits had the high ground, but also because they had plenty of military supplies — they weren't any ordinary bandits, they must have had someone's support.

The Qi Clique is far away in the capital, and cannot remotely do anything, thus they must need a local official's help... Xu Qi'an had a great realisation.

Wei Yuan continued: "After the message reached the capital, that spy died mysteriously, without saying anything more. His real identity was a registrar in the Regional Military Commission.

"But he's dead, and his proof is nowhere to be found. I have already reported this to His Majesty, and he will send an inspector general from the Censorate to Yunzhou to investigate this matter.

"Your objective is to protect the inspector general, as well as find evidence."

Xu Qi'an, feeling himself in a somewhat difficult position, asked: "Why do I need to go to Yunzhou?"

Still not so willing... Wei Yuan said: "This matter will be overseen by Jiang Lyuzhong, you will go along to learn in the field."

Xu Qi'an immediately felt a lot more reassured, "There's... there's one more matter. Duke Wei, chicken bouillon shouldn't be consumed in large amounts, it easily causes thirst, so you should tell the kitchen to be conservative with it."

Wei Yuan had just lectured him, and not only did he not seek revenge, but even gave good-intentioned advice, Xu Qi'an felt that he was far too nice.

Wei Yuan did not speak, pointing at the door.

"Your subordinate will go now." Xu Qi'an immediately ran off.

Chapter 178. One Must Be Discrete

Tomorrow he would leave the capital, and journey far to Yunzhou. Xu Qi'an immediately left the constabulary, going home to pack.

To not raise any suspicions, he only left his most valuable possessions in the small jade mirror, such as silver, gold, promissory notes...

He then informed Auntie and Sister, telling them that he needed to accompany the Inspector General to Yunzhou.

Since he was born Xu Qi'an had never left the capital, even Auntie could not resist but to fuss over him, telling him to bring this and bring that, making sure that he packed his clothes...

"I heard that there's a lot of miasma in Yunzhou, and the weather is rainy year round, you need to bring some anti-toxin pills, some drying cream... Xu Ningyan, I'm talking to you." Auntie slapped the table.

"I know, I know," Xu Qi'an was getting annoyed, and said back grumpily, "You don't need to tell me this, I'm just informing you."

In my last life I was a southerner, I can keep warm just by my vital energy, what is some cold damp southern country to me... Xu Qi'an muttered.

...

Jiaofangsi, Reflecting Plum Pavilion.

The creaking of the bed slowly stopped. Xu Qi'an propped himself up on his hands, looking at the flushed, red-faced beauty beneath him, "Tomorrow I need to leave the capital and go to Yunzhou, I probably won't return for quite a long time."

Hearing this, Fuxiang's two long pale legs clamped around his waist, as she said with a worried tone: "I heard that the banditry problem in Yunzhou is really serious, it's really dangerous."

"However dangerous it is, it is still ruled by the crown." Xu Qi'an pinched Fuxiang's face lightly, expressing that he wasn't worried.

"You haven't come round for so long, and the one time you come you're talking about this." Fuxiang pouted.

“I was afraid of working you too hard, not turning a cold shoulder.”

As the two of them talked, the rhythmic creaking of the bed started again.

...

Leaving the Jiaofangsi, Xu Qi'an went to Stargazing Tower, and told his coming trip to Yunzhou to Chu Caiwei.

When the beauty in the yellow dress heard him, she was extremely moved, and expressed that she wanted to go too. However, the chicken bouillon still needed to be refined, produced and spread around, and then she needed to use this opportunity to advance to the sixth rank, she couldn't leave the capital.

No matter what this outing required an arcanist, and the reason why Xu Qi'an specially made the journey, was out of a selfish desire to bring Chu Caiwei along, so it was more like a holiday.

Many couples whose relationship were ambiguous, would go out on holiday together, and as they travelled and travelled, their child would be conceived.

He didn't manage to bring Chu Caiwei, but Xu Qi'an took the chicken bouillon that she had spent so much effort making. The round-faced beauty angrily chased him all the way out of the Stargazing Tower, and shouted towards Xu Qi'an's quickly retreating figure: “Xu Qi'an you bastard!”

He then went to the palace, and requested to see Princess Huaqing. As an ally of the eldest princess, he would naturally report on his coming trip, as well as discussing the situation of Yunzhou with the intelligent princess.

The attendant returned with the Princess's answer: “The Princess doesn't want to see you.”

Mn? Doesn't want to see me? Yesterday we had gotten along just fine, what I did yesterday should have made Huaqing care more about me... Xu Qi'an left with a head full of fog.

Having been cruelly refused by big sister, Xu Qi'an immediately went to find the plum-faced, attractive and passionate younger sister.

Lin'an wasn't in the palace, rather in Lin'an Manor in the Imperial City.

Biaobiao is really efficient huh. Xu Qi'an immediately turned around to go to Lin'an manor. Not long later, he arrived, and after the guards announced his presence, he was granted entry.

Xu Qi'an walked and gazed around, at the gardens, pavilions, and all sorts, he even saw a stage where singers would perform, thinking that she's worthy of being the Emperor's most spoiled daughter.

Hearing that Xu Qi'an was visiting, Biaobiao was very happy. Sitting in a pavilion, she said with a face full of smiles, “I feel so much freer out of the palace, but this manor is too boring, it's not as interesting as living back there.”

The meaning hidden behind her words were very clear: *What do you want to play?*

I've not come to play, I've come to say see you later... Xu Qi'an said: “Tomorrow I must leave the capital and go to Yunzhou, and may not return for a long time. I know that we are meant to meet tomorrow, so I have come to say goodbye to Your Highness.”

Hearing this, Lin'an's face fell, looking at him with disappointment.

If, if that's the case, then her whole rigmarole of coming out here was all for naught. Her mother had allowed her to live outside for three days, and she was secretly very excited, thinking that this Bronze Gong would take her to play in the inner city.

"Then your subordinate will leave now." Xu Qi'an turned to leave, but after a few steps, he could not resist looking back.

Lin'an sat in the pavilion, behind her a barren winter garden. Her dress was red like fire, and she shone with beauty, but at the same time looked ever so lonely.

Bloody hell... He thought to himself, and came back again.

"Does Your Highness like to play Go?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It's too much of a bother."

Maybe because you're not clever enough... Xu Qi'an said: "Your subordinate has a new way to play, Your Highness can try it, if you're bored, you can also play with your maids."

Lin'an pursed her lips, somewhat disappointed: "Just this?"

As long as you don't sing its praises soon. Xu Qi'an summoned a maid, ordering her to bring a Go set, laying it out on the stone table.

"Second princess, what I'm going to teach you is called five-in-a-row. There aren't many rules or techniques, it's very easy to play. No matter horizontally, vertically, or diagonally, whoever links together five stones in a row is the winner."

"If it's so easy, then there's even less point." Lin'an shook her head.

"Don't be hasty, let's play a round first." Xu Qi'an said with confidence.

"Alright."

Lin'an picked up a stone, and with a clack put it on the board, nodding her pale forehead towards Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an followed suit.

As they played and played, Biaobiao slowly started to get into it. The two of them lay down stone after stone, as in a quick succession of *clack, clack, clack*, Xu Qi'an won the first round.

"Again, let's go again!" Biaobiao kicked her legs, her red skirt fluttering.

Round two, round three, round four... Biaobiao lost again and again, but she was more and more excited, concentration showing in her almond-shaped eyes.

With a shock she discovered, that even though this type of Go was really easy to play, with no fancy tricks or stratagems, but for some reason it was far more fun than regular Go. One could not resist but be pulled into it.

Losing again and again, and playing again and again, a fighting spirit flared up inside her.

At the same time, she slowly got the impression that she was a Go master, advancing her armies across the board and doing deadly battle.

Finally, Xu Qi'an deliberately made a blunder, letting her make up five in a row.

"I've won!" Biaobiao cheered happily.

Xu Qi'an smiled, sitting as if everything was under his control.

If Huaiqing were to play a thing like five-in-a-row, she would be bored of it within fifteen minutes, and would scoff at its base simplicity.

However for a simple girl like Lin'an, five-in-a-row was an extremely interesting game; even simple games had great levels of replayability. Xu Qi'an once was also once addicted to these little games, such as Stack, Puzzle Match, 2048, so on and so forth.

They played for several hours, as his mind kept telling him: *you can't play any more, you can't play any more...*

His body, however, really wanted to continue.

"Xu Ningyan, you're really skilled." Lin'an's jade like finger tapped on the Go board, "you know how to write poems, and also know so many of these fun little things.

"Oh right, did you manage to finish the first half of that poem?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head.

"*Drunk he knows not if the sky is in the water, his dream laden boat atop the milky way.*" Princess Lin'an didn't continue asking, muttering the poem quietly.

"It's really beautiful, one day I too want to lay on a bed, looking at the stars overhead, with stars all around, I hope then I'll be free."

At that moment, she wasn't Biaobiao, but rather a naive, innocent little girl.

"Second princess, did you tell the eldest princess that I gave you chicken bouillon." Xu Qi'an suddenly asked.

"No!" Lin'an fluttered her charming eyes, turning in an instant from the innocent little girl Lin'an, to queen-of-the-dance floor Biaobiao.

"Oh." Xu Qi'an did not press the issue, glancing at the sky, only then realising that it was dusk, the imperial city had shut its gates, and he had no way out.

Since the patrols around the Imperial City were conducted by Silver Gongs, his token had no use here, and nor did Princess Lin'an's.

The curfew in the Imperial city was strict, it was hard enough already to gain permission for entry from the court, and permission usually had to be sought several days in advance, not given on the spot. Furthermore, the constabulary in the imperial city had already ended their day.

...

Xu Qi'an could only stay the night at Lin'an manor. At dusk, he walked around with the princess, and discovered that in the back garden was a great big pond.

Beside the pond was moored a boat with a cover.

Heh, she keeps on talking about laying in a boat, looking at the stars... clearly heaven and earth are aligned for this, yet she only talks... youths now, they're always full of talk, and unable to do anything.

Xu Qi'an left wordlessly, and when Biaobiao summoned him for the evening meal, he said: "Your Highness, how about we have dinner somewhere else."

The princess's eyes lit up, as she didn't even ask further, ordering her maids to bring the table and dishes to the back garden, under his direction. Finally, they got on the boat.

After laying out the table, and lighting a brazier, there wasn't much more room in the boat. Therefore, the maids could only watch from the shore, exchanging looks with some worry.

Their princess had gotten rather close to this man; there wasn't much of an issue during the day, but to eat together like this on the middle of the lake, was inappropriate in all social etiquette.

Lin'an had drank several cups of wine, and her face was red: "We have never tried to have a meal in a boat before."

In the candlelight, her round face was like a piece of flawless jade, her gaze soft and beautiful like silk. She was the very image of an ancient beauty, yet in Xu Qi'an's mind he couldn't resist but swap her palace dress with a red t-shirt, a little bear embroidered on it, and on her legs a pair of blue jeans, then a pair of white socks and tennis shoes. Her two legs were long and straight, making waves as she danced across the club's floor.

Darkness fell, and a curved moon hung in the sky.

Xu Qi'an said suddenly: "Lie down."

Biaobiao paused a moment, trying to process his words, but then without another thought lay backwards...

"Ow!"

Her head collided with the wooden deck, and she shouted in pain, but quickly became entranced. Upon the night sky was hung a sickle moon, decorated around by a field of stars, twinkling upon the vast emptiness.

"Drunk, she knows not if the sky is in the water, a dream laden boat atop the milky way." Xu Qi'an said in a low voice.

She looked at the stars above, lost in thought, her gaze indistinct. Xu Qi'an looked at her, at her refined jaw, her raised nose, her small, slightly open mouth.

A girl like her was gifted with beauty, and tipsy, her appearance was irresistible.

“The stars are too small, I want to see the milky way, the milky way!” She lay on the deck, twisting her hips, unconsciously acting coquettish.

There were quite a few stars tonight, but compared to a whole river of the milky way it could not compare, but that had to wait until summer.

“How pretty...” she sighed.

...

Stargazing Tower, the Bagua platform.

The Jianzheng stood by the edge of the platform, observing the heavens. His ears suddenly twitched.

A few seconds later, a magical formation lit up, as a white cloaked arcanist appeared within, slowly intoning:

“Picking the stars with...”

He had barely gotten halfway, when his voice suddenly cut off, as if his throat was just seized by an invisible hand, unable to force out the rest of his verse.

The Jianzheng, his back also turned, his white beard fluttering in the wind, said: “Go to Yunzhou, watch over...”

The latter half of the sentence was communicated silently.

Teacher and disciple stood with their backs to each other. Yang Qianhuan tentatively asked: “Secretly?”

“Mhm.”

“I understand. What other instructions does Teacher have?”

“Be discrete. If you go saying that all over the place, you’ll get beaten up.”

“Yes, Teacher.”

Chapter 179. Leaving the Capital

In the morning, Princess Lin’an slowly woke up, feeling warm and snug all around. She stretched comfortably, and her foot collided with the table leg with a “clunk”.

She opened her dazed eyes with confusion, seeing a deathly pale sky; at this time, the sun had yet to rise.

Biaobiao was as if waking up with a hangover from a night at a club, as her expression slowly changed from one of blank confusion to complete bewilderment, thinking that her eyes must not be working properly; why wasn’t she looking at an embroidered brocade bed canopy, rather at the dawn sky?

She groaned tiredly, in a lovably silly manner.

Last night's scenes slowly flitted through her mind, like scenes from a show. She remembered that in the night she was having dinner with Xu Ningyan on the boat, talking and drinking.

Perhaps because she had never had such an experience, she immediately agreed to this small Bronze Gong's suggestion, but as an unmarried princess, if such an uncouth action were to get out, her name would be ruined in an instant.

Later on, maybe because she had started drinking, she let down her guard, and almost automatically at his suggestion laid down in the boat.

When she saw the sky full of glittering stars, Biaobiao's heart became drunk with its beauty, the only thing on her mind: *drunk, I know not if the sky is in the water, my dream laden boat sailing atop the milky way.*

She was enthralled.

Like that, she didn't want to sit up again, and under the influence of alcohol, slowly drifted to sleep.

It was so warm, too, even on a boat in the middle of winter's grasp, she didn't feel a little bit cold, rather warm as if she was in her mother's embrace.

However she didn't have enough mind to worry about this, Biaobiao sat up in a panic, discovering that there was a brocade duvet laid on her. She instinctively wanted to throw it off, before pausing, feeling around her own body under the covers, and making sure that she was fully clothed, and that nothing was amiss.

Nothing amiss, such as the ache when one loses their virginity, so written about in texts.

Biaobiao let out a long sigh of relief, and looked around. She saw the maid guarding her by the shore, and thus turned from the hung-over Biaobiao to the dignified Princess Lin'an.

She called over a guard by the shore, telling him to jump on the boat, and help her off. At the same time, she asked: "When did Master Xu Leave?"

"He left before it got light." The palace maid replied quietly.

Lin'an nodded with a dispirited air, thinking back to the warmth she felt that night. Thinking closely though, that warmth shouldn't have come from the covers alone, and so she made a stern face:

"Last night, were there any errant moves?"

"Yes Ma'am."

The maid, with bags under her eyes after not sleeping all night, immediately told on him: "He disrespected Your Highness."

"Eh?" Princess Lin'an's expression was terrified.

"He was holding Your Highness's hand," the maid said resentfully, "and when he left before dawn, he slapped... slapped your servant's... buttocks, threatening me not to tell Your Highness."

That unreasonable!

Lin'an's willow-thin brows turned nearly vertical, as she had a feeling of embarrassment of misjudging someone's character.

“Second princess...” the guard mumbled hesitantly.

“What are you mumbling about!” Lin’an glanced at him unhappily.

“It was freezing last night, and Your Highness was sleeping on the boat — a single duvet would not have been enough to fend off the cold.” The guard explained, “Your subordinate saw last night that Master Xu did not sleep at all, and the reason why he was holding Your Highness’s hand was to transfer qi and expel the cold.”

Transfer qi... did not sleep at all... Biaobiao stared blankly for a moment, then remembering that she did indeed have a very comfortable night, asked with suspicion: “Why have we not heard of this matter, and no one in the past has transferred qi to me.”

“This...” the guard forced a smile, “To work one’s qi over a whole night without sleeping, expending one’s own energy, who could really keep that up. Except a middle or high rank martial artist, that is.

“Furthermore, Your Highness wears brocade and dines on jade, usually this is unnecessary.”

Biaobiao bit her lip, testing: “How tiring is it?”

The guard replied: “If it were your subordinate, I would be already dead.”

Her glossy eyes rippled with emotion, and her gaze became as soft as silk.

“When Master- Master Xu left, he seemed... to be very tired.” The maid recalled, “But why did he order your servant to not say anything?”

Lin’an did not respond to this question, suddenly walking towards the door: “This morning he needs to leave the capital for Yunzhou, what time is it, we wish to send him off...”

She didn’t know why, but there were ripples coursing through her heart, yearning to see her running dog.

“Your Highness, it’s past six...” the maid chased after her, “furthermore, since when would a princess send off a Bronze Gong, if this got out, it would be a disaster for both you and him.”

These words stopped the headstrong princess Lin’an in her tracks.

For me, at most I would be scolded by father... but on my reputation, a small Bronze Gong like him would be bound to face much worse... Lin’an’s gaze scanned over her maid and guard, and her round face showed a rare expression of royal might:

“This matter concerns our reputation, you are not to tell anyone about last night’s events, else you shall be beaten until dead.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

...

The road from the capital to Yunzhou was a long one, and so to save time, the imperial envoy decided to use the canal routes, and avoid travelling overland.

The government boat cut through the waves, its sails bulging.

Xu Qi'an stood on the deck, welcoming the river winds. Boats big and small were moored at the river shore, both government and private crafts.

"You don't look too good, you're overworked." Jiang Lyuzhong came to the deck, and stood side by side. Looking across at Xu Qi'an, he laughed: "Busy night at the Jiaofangsi?"

"... mhm." Xu Qi'an didn't have anything to say.

He did indeed go the Jiaofangsi, and had a parting exchange with Fuxiang, but what really tired him out was that his energy was all sapped by Biaobiao. The latter, though, could not be spoken of.

"Look at you, you're still young, your eye bags are still light." Jiang Lyuzhong put both hands on the railing, laughing with the laugh of an old seasoned veteran,

"Yunzhou also has a Jiaofangsi, the women south of the river have soft bodies, soft voices, and a whole different feeling to the capital."

"They're not the same." Xu Qi'an shook his head.

"You're a romantic type of guy?" Jiang Lyuzhong said with shock.

This has nothing to do with romance, and everything to do with freeloading... Xu Qi'an said solemnly, "Unless Gold Gong Jiang is willing to pay."

"Wha?" Jiang Lyuzhong stared back blankly.

"If you pay, then it's the same either way." Xu Qi'an was very serious.

Jiang Lyuzhong thought for a moment, before pointing to the river surface: "What do you think the water is like here?"

Xu Qi'an's gaze followed, and he replied very sincerely: "Nothing much to say, dirty as anywhere else."

Jiang Lyuzhong nodded: "Good that you know."

Xu Qi'an: "..."

After a while, Jiang Lyuzhong said: "We will take the canal south as far as Qingzhou, afterwards we would need to travel on land. About ten days' travel on land will be enough to reach Yunzhou."

"Sir Jiang, isn't it inappropriate to tell me about these secrets." Xu Qi'an said.

"No matter, with your ability sooner or later you'll become a Gold Gong." Jiang Lyuzhong smiled without much of a care.

From friend to friend, if you set goalposts for me I'll be angry too... Xu Qi'an replied also with a smile: "Thank you for your kind words. So, why do we need to switch to the dry road?"

“Overland”, Jiang Lyuzhong said, before explaining: “Whilst Qingzhou and Yunzhou are bordering, there are no waterways connecting them. If we were to go via water all the way, then we would need to detour around the neighbouring Shazhou, and it’ll be slower than going by land.”

“There aren’t any waterways?” Xu Qi’an expressed his confusion.

“Originally there were, there was a tributary river connecting Yunzhou and Qingzhou, but just over a decade ago the river suddenly changed course.” Jiang Lyuzhong explained.

It changed course... Xu Qi’an slowly nodded.

Hydraulic infrastructure has been a headache-inducing problem for the court since ancient times; rivers will often dry up, or change course. Even in his previous life, flooding was a big issue for all. It was all well and good for a guy to change course, there’s a back door to take, but when the water changes course, disaster follows for a thousand li, and the people suffer.[^1]

Just then they saw a plume of black smoke rise up in the distance. Xu Qi’an focused his eyes, and saw that it came from a little boat moored in the distance. There were people on it burning goods.

“What’s up with this, why are they burning goods?” Xu Qi’an said deeply.

His first reaction was that there were law-breakers, destroying merchants’ goods.

Jiang Lyuzhong glanced over, and said with realisation: “Usually this happens because a merchant doesn’t want to go through the toll gate, they’ll burn their goods and return home.”

“They’re nearly at the capital, why bother with this?” Xu Qi’an did not understand.

“Heh, the court sets many levy gates on the river. Every time you pass one, you pay a tax, and as you pay and pay, many merchants will find that even if they reach their destination and sell all their goods, their profit wouldn’t even be enough to pay tax. Thus they would just burn their produce and return, since even on the return leg if you carry any goods you have to pay tax again, but an empty boat is tax free.” Jiang Lyuzhong sighed: “Burning goods on the river is a common sight.”

“What bad table manners.” Xu Qi’an raised an eyebrow.

“There’s worse. Some smaller merchants can’t pay the shipping tax, and so can only rely on merchant guilds. Those guilds will buy up their goods at rock bottom prices, and sell them with a markup. Let’s use that saltpetre mine you found in Taikang county as an example. The local *huihu* pick rocks and refine them into lime, but the capital can’t consume such a large amount. Thus, they can only sell to the various different provinces, but they wouldn’t be able to afford the shipping tax.

“Thus the merchant guilds will buy the lime for a low price, and ship it through their own connections. The *huihu* would only get a tenth of the final sale price at best, just enough to eat their fill.

“The various interests involved in this are difficult to handle, even Duke Wei treats this matter with much apprehension.”

Xu Qi'an fell silent.

He thought of another matter. Emperor Yuanjing's daoist cultivation requires many medicines, the cost of them were astronomical, and this silver wasn't taken from the state coffers, but rather from his personal treasury.

Then, how was Emperor Yuanjing able to keep up with this endless money sucking void?

He didn't ask this out loud, returning to the hold to meditate, recouping his energy. Around noon, his stomach was rumbling with hunger.

Leaving his room he heard a lively conversation coming from the deck. He quickly found out that the boatmen had hauled up many plump river fish, and dumped them on the deck to flop around.

Lead by Jiang Lyuzhong, Song Tingfeng and twenty other Bronze Gongs were all joining in the bustle, excited to have fresh fish soup to drink for lunch.

The inspector general who was leading this expedition also came out with a frown, hearing the noise.

He was an assistant censor in chief of the Censorate, a fourth-rank official. The role of inspector general was usually taken by Censors, and their power was great indeed.

The Censorate was controlled by Wei Yuan, and the great azure cloak even had a role there, a Censor-in-chief, second rank. Thus this inspector general could be considered one of their men.

This inspector general had been in his room seasick the whole morning, as the world turned and wobbled around him, and he was just resting when he was awoken by this bunch of martial artists. Naturally, he was very upset.

“Pick out some of the plumpest fish for the inspector general.” Jiang Lyuzhong smiled.

The inspector general, with a long trailing goatee beard and an air of a scholar, waved his hand, his brow furrowed intently: “River fish smell too strong, this official doesn't have any appetite for it.”

After refusing Jiang Lyuzhong's good intentions, he scanned over the Bronze Gongs with displeasure, “Be more quiet, what decorum is there, jumping and shouting like that.”

Afterwards, he returned below deck impatiently.

“Tut tut, scholars' bodies are so weak, can't stand this little rocking.” A bronze gong remarked, before being stared down by Jiang Lyuzhong.

Fresh fish soup... perfect for adding some chicken bouillon... Xu Qi'an, stomach rumbling, was filled with yearning for lunch.

Chapter 180. Xu Xinnian: I Have No Family

Considering the issue of oil and smoke, the kitchen of the boat was located in the upper deck of the hold, in a place easy to ventilate. The kitchen's wall and floors were painted in a fire retardant red lacquer. This lacquer's main ingredient was the sap of a "bug-eating tree", which was resistant to both flame and water.

Thus this type of tree has been planted far and wide at the encouragement of the Ministry of Industry, and used widely in construction.

In the kitchen, a few cooks were busy preparing the noon meal, so busy that they had worked up a sheen of sweat even in the winter. The pot on the fire was filled with fish soup stewing, as steam bubbled against the lid, and a thick fragrance filled the air.

Xu Qi'an followed the scent to the kitchen, and not minding anyone else, went over and opened the lid: "Is the fish soup done?"

"It will be done very soon!"

The cooks were shocked that an official would come into a smoke and miasma filled place like the kitchens.

Xu Qi'an stared at the light brown fish soup, the colour owing to the addition of soy sauce. He took a sniff, and said: "Give me a ladle."

A cook immediately gave him a ladle, and Xu Qi'an ladelled a mouthful of soup. Tasting it, he said with surprise: "It's less fishy than I thought"

Owing to the lack of seasoning, and chefs' skills, most freshwater fish dishes in this world had an earthy, fishy taste that was difficult to get rid of. Naturally, this didn't apply to the fanciest restaurants, such as Guiyuelou, their chefs were capable enough to manage.

Hearing this, a cook said proudly, "Of course sir, we live on the water, and eat fish every day, so there's no one who knows how to cook a fish better than us. As to how to get rid of the smell... hehe, that's a secret."

He didn't want to reveal his methods.

Xu Qi'an snorted, "This official also has his own secret recipes, which can increase the savouriness of this soup by several fractions."

The cooks didn't believe him, but they didn't rebut him out loud, not daring to. However, their disapproving expressions were not hidden at all in their eyes.

Xu Qi'an thus took out a porcelain pot containing the chicken bouillon.

"S- sir..."

The cooks turned pale with fright. They had worked on government boats for many years, and had served many officials, developing a natural sensitivity to matters of food.

If the officials on the boat were to be poisoned, then they would be buried along with them.

“What are you scared off, in a bit you can taste the soup for poison yourself.” Xu Qi’an comforted them.

Not only were the cooks not comforted, but they were even more worried.

Xu Qi’an first poured a little bit into the soup, and tasted it. Feeling that it was not enough, he added a little more, and after a couple times of this, nodded with satisfaction.

“Come, taste it!” He ladled out a spoonful of soup, and gave it to the cook that spoke up.

Seeing Xu Qi’an taste it himself gave the cook a measure of braveness. He hesitated a bit, but took the spoon, and drank. In an instant, his eyes opened wide.

The savoury fish soup covered his taste buds, as with a gulp, the cook instinctively swallowed it down.

In his mouth was left a lingering umami.

“It’s... it’s so good...” the cook became excited, “Sir, what, what is this recipe, what is this marvellous recipe, please may sir teach us.”

Xu Qi’an: “Heh.”

...

Inspector general Zhang sat on his bed, hand on his forehead, trying to resist the rocking of the boat in motion. After eating the medicine given to him by the white cloaked arcanists, he felt a little bit better.

An attendant brought over hot tea: “Sir, when we leave the capital region, the winds will be smaller, then you’ll not have so much of a headache.”

The inspector general nodded, and took a sip of tea.

“It’s time for lunch, your servant will bring it for you.” The attendant said.

“No need,” Inspector General Zhang waved him off, pinching his brows: “This official is nauseous, and has no appetite...”

Just as the words left his mouth, his nose twitched: “What is that smell?”

From the open window the winds blew in a savoury fragrance, that tugged at the inspector general’s appetite, making him slowly start to drool.

“Gulp...” he swallowed down saliva, his gaze reaching out of the window, mind elsewhere.

He was silent for a while, before saying: “Whatever, although I have no appetite, it’s not good to not eat. Get some food for me... mn, although that fish soup’s fishy odour is difficult to stomach, we cannot carry ourselves above everyone else, and must eat the same as our soldiers.”

The attendant happily took the order, and jogged out of the room, thinking that the inspector general was a worthy scholar, even shameless sentiment could be expressed in such a subtle manner.

Xu Qi'an and his colleagues sat in the large hall below decks, eating and chatting idly.

"This fish soup is the best, I've never drank anything so awesome in my life."

"Yeah, even the fishiness adds to it."

"If I can drink this type of soup every day, then I'll happily spend the rest of my days on a boat."

The Nightwatchers ate with great energy, enjoying the surprisingly delicious fish soup.

Jiang Lyuzhong had a table to himself. His eyes were closed, as he enjoyed the umami fragrance of that soup. Calling over the cook, he asked curiously: "This soup's flavour is not like usual, it's nothing this official has tasted before, how did you make it?"

You must have some sort of secret ingredient... Jiang Lyuzhong thought.

He wasn't after their secret ingredients though, being genuinely just curious as to how this legendary soup was made.

The cook looked towards Xu Qi'an, "It's that sir's secret recipe, it has nothing to do with me."

All the Nightwatchers looked over.

"What are you looking at me for, this is the Sitianjian's formulation, it has nothing to do with me." Xu Qi'an said immediately.

He knew this bunch of morally deficient Nightwatchers, Jiang Lyuzhong included, was bound to think up of any way to get some off him.

The group immediately looked to the three white cloaked arcanists. The youngest of them said: "What are you looking at me for, the Sitianjian's formulation was given to us by Master Xu."

Motherfucker, these white cloaks just want to argue don't they... Xu Qi'an lampooned.

Just then, a group of armoured guards came into the hold, simultaneously sniffing the delicious smell of fish soup, and silently taking their own simple dinner.

In this envoy to Yunzhou, there were twenty Bronze Gongs, six Silver Gongs, one Gold Gong, Inspector General Zhang and his three attendants, and one hundred *Huben* royal guards.

In total, this made a hundred and thirty one.

These royal guards lived in the cramped and dark bottom deck, and didn't eat with the Nightwatchers. Naturally, there was no fish soup for them.

The men's noses twitched, as they silently swallowed down saliva, looking longingly at the fish soup.

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, before calling over the cook: "Is there more fish? If not, go catch more, cook these soldiers a pot of soup, make sure everyone gets some."

As he spoke, he handed the bottle over to the cook: "If there's not enough, call me for more."

The Huben guards' eyes immediately lit up, as they unconsciously straightened their back: "Thank you, Sir."

I'm too soft hearted, too soft hearted, all these problems I have to bear... Xu Qi'an nodded, "I'm called Xu."

"Thank you, Sir Xu."

Just then, Inspector General Zhang's attendant walked in, announcing loudly: "Is there still fish soup, our master would like some."

Everyone roared in laughter, and the hold was filled with merriment.

...

The capital, just before dusk.

Xu Xinnian returned to the capital. He wanted to go home to get some more clothes, as well as some rice and silver.

Students studying at the Cloud Deer Academy must pay tuition every three months. Furthermore, they must bring their own food; the academy gave them lodging but not catering.

Thus Xu Erlang would come home regularly, dropping off his dirty clothes at home and bringing along three months worth of silver and food.

"Hss..."

He pulled the reins on his horse, stopping outside the Xu manor, finding with shock that the door was locked.

This was no small matter, as there were still servants in the manor. Even if the Xu family was not present, and not receiving guests, the doors would still be locked on the inside; a lock on the outside indicated that no one was there at all.

Xu Erlang's heart sank, as he had a bad feeling.

He dismounted, and came to the wall. Taking a deep breath, he said clearly: "Vaulting walls and flying over rafters!"

He took a few steps back, feeling a coursing energy fill his limbs, and with a little run, leapt over the three metre tall wall, landing lightly on the other side.

The manor was quiet, and there was no one to be found.

Xu Xinnian walked from the outer courtyard to the inner yard, opening door after door, his sister's, his parents', the servants'... the place was deserted.

Most importantly, everything in the manor was moved away, and what was left in the rooms were only empty bed frames, with all the duvets missing.

Where's my home? Where's my massive home... right, I guess the house is still here, but where's my family? Xu Xinnian stood blankly in the yard, thinking over his life.

The door had a lock on it, but not an official seal, this means that it wasn't big brother committing some other sort of crime... all the possessions have been moved away, but there is no dust on the ground, everything is tidy, thus we haven't been robbed...

Xu Xinnian used his deduction skills to come to a conclusion: they had moved.

Why did no one tell me of this? Did they forget that they had a son in the Cloud Deer Academy?

Xu Qi'an wanted to shout out in anger.

Bugger...

Immediately after, his face turned, as he quickly buffed himself, before vaulting over the wall, getting on his horse, wanting to get out of the city before the gates closed.

Just then, the faint sound of drums came over, drums indicating the closing of the city gates.

...

The new house.

Uncle Xu was on night patrol that day, and had to leave just after dinner.

Auntie looked at her husband, and asked: "Normally, Erlang would be back now, wouldn't he? He didn't bring much money last time."

As a mother, she naturally cared most about her son, and always had in mind when he would return home.

"It's roughly around now." Uncle Xu said without much care.

"Dalang... did he write to him?" Auntie asked.

"Dunno."

"What does 'dunno' mean?" Auntie's brows turned near vertical.

"I didn't ask him." Uncle Xu replied, before finishing his meal, attaching his scabbard, and putting on his helmet:

"I'm going out now, look after Lingyin, make sure she doesn't go to the well. Also, don't be worried that this place is haunted, the house isn't haunted."

Uncle Xu left the house.

That night, he was leading a patrol around the outer city, and when he passed his old home, he saw a figure squatting by its door, hugging his knees, face buried in his arms, shivering with cold.

Beside him was a horse, listlessly snorting and stamping its hooves.

There was no curfew in the outer city, the common people could come and go without restriction, but the city guard had the power to interrogate on the spot. Seeing that someone was outside his own home, Uncle Xu naturally went up to check.

He was just about to shout at him, when the torchlight fell upon the figure's scholar gown, and he suddenly seemed very familiar.

Uncle Xu did a double take, thinking *this can't be...*

"Erlang?" He said waveringly.

That figure in scholar robes raised his head, his face beautiful without flaw, his expression haggard. It was indeed Xu Erlang.

Father and son looked silently at each other for a while, as Uncle Xu felt his scalp tingle: “Why didn’t you sleep in an inn?”

That god-damned Xu Ningyan, he didn’t write a letter to his brother.

“I have no money.”

“Why not rest in the manor?”

“The horse will be stolen.”

“Why not return to the academy?”

“The gate’s shut.”

“... the family’s moved to the inner city, we forgot to tell you. Mn, there’s a curfew in the inner city, father will take you to a tavern.”

Xu Xinnian slowly turned his face away, his voice empty: “Respected Sir, I have no family.”

Uncle Xu: “...”

...

In the night, the moon shone brightly.

There were only so many rooms on the boat, and Xu Qi’an as a Bronze Gong didn’t have his own quarters to himself. He shared a room with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao.

Their beds were placed next to each other, all in a row.

He turned to look left, and saw Song Tingfeng’s face facing him. Turning to look right, he saw Zhu Guangxiao facing him.

Xu Qi’an suddenly thought of a joke: If you were sleeping between a man and a woman, would you face your arse towards the man or the woman?

Arse-towards-girl would be called gay, but arse-towards-guy would leave your rear fortifications undefended, if I were in this situation, I’d face up... Xu Qi’an was in the middle of idle lampooning, when a knock sounded on the door.

From outside came Inspector General Zhang’s attendant’s voice: “Sir Xu, our Master has invitations.”