

Nightwatcher 181

Chapter 181. Group Chats

“Understood.”

After answering the attendant, Xu Qi’an sat up, threw off his duvet, and started putting on his clothes.

Sensing movement from beside him, Song Tingfeng opened his eyes, and muttered: “Where are you going.”

Xu Qi’an muttered back: “I’m going out for a moment, I’ll be back soon.”

Song Tingfeng grunted.

After their conversation, the two of them simultaneously froze, and then simultaneously shivered.

“Piss off, shoo,” Song Tingfeng rubbed the goosebumps on his arms, cursing: “ruining my damn sleep.”

When Xu Qi’an had left, Zhu Guangxiao silently turned to face the other way.

...

The moonlight was like water, and the stars twinkled in the vast emptiness.

The river was quiet, its ripples scattering the moonlight, reflecting patches of light like thousands of silver scales.

There was a light on in Inspector General Zhang’s room. Xu Qi’an knocked on his door, and after receiving permission to enter, opened the inspector general’s door.

In the rather small room, Inspector General Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong were sat across from each other, drinking tea. The latter pointed to an empty seat beside them: “Sit, pour yourself some tea.”

Inspector General Zhang, with his long goatee beard and naturally stern expression, nodded at Xu Qi’an.

To this mysterious Bronze Gong that had appeared in court twice, and had twice defeated high ministers, the inspector general treated him with great importance and a friendly attitude.

Drinking tea in the middle of the night, do you think that the quality of your sleep is too good?

Xu Qi’an sat down, tone somewhat casual: “Sirs, what can your subordinate do for you?”

The Censorate and Nightwatchers were different government departments, but they had the same superior: being Wei Yuan. Thus Inspector General Zhang was on his side, and Xu Qi’an didn’t need to bother with too many formalities.

The inspector general laughed, “Master Xu’s deduction skills are extraordinary, and abilities outstanding. The reason why this official called you here is to discuss the mission we have in Yunzhou.”

Xu Qi’an considered his words, before asking: “What does Sir think?”

The inspector general replied: "I have already seen the dossier. There were no flaws in Zhou Min's death; there were no wounds, no sign of poison, in all regards a normal death like any other.

"But to die without cause nor reason, without any sign of harm, this in itself is suspicious."

Zhou Min was that spy who had died for no reason.

Jiang Lyuzhong added: "In all the different systems, the only ones who could carry this out are the Daoists and Warlocks. From the case of the Minister of Industry, we can see that the Qi Clique conspired with the warlocks, and so the killer is most likely to be a fourth rank warlock of dreams."

Xu Qi'an nodded. Firstly, he confirmed the inspector general's intelligence; he wasn't an empty headed official, but had a clear and realistic view of the situation, and what he would be facing.

This, this was good.

The worst thing to happen would be to have to work with a useless superior.

He wasn't afraid of an opponent like a god, but was afraid of a friend like a pig. To tell the truth, from how sickly Inspector General Zhang was before, Xu Qi'an had had such worries.

Secondly, he confirmed Jiang Lyuzhong's deductions.

Any murderer will leave signs of their act — not necessarily that they would leave any leads, but rather a very objective impression that that person was killed.

Even if one were to use deep arts to destroy one's soul, the victim would display a blank, dull, and frightened look on his face.

But the only ones who could make a person seem to die in his sleep would be the Church of the Warlock God, this part was easy to see.

"So how does Sir think we should investigate when we get to Yunzhou?" Xu Qi'an asked humbly.

In matters of investigation he may be skilled, but he was a stranger to the interactions and processes on official levels.

"Zhou Min is a very experienced mole, he would not leave any important evidence at his side. What we need to do is discover the evidence that he had hidden. As for this master Xu, we must rely on your experience to solve this matter."

The inspector general said with a serious tone, displaying a great deal of trust for Xu Qi'an's abilities.

"I will try my best." Xu Qi'an suddenly thought of a problem, and frowned: "Yang Chuannan is the commissioner-in-chief of Yunzhou, and he controls a lot of military force. Would this force him into rebellion? And then, being in the way of his charge, we would be very much worse off."

Military officials and the officials in the capital were two different matters. The Capital's six city guards and three royal guard divisions were all under the control of the crown, the civil servants had no power over them.

However, as a province's military commissioner-in-chief, with power at hand, who would allow themselves to be walked over?

"This is a risk we must face. Jiang Lyuzhong and I will be responsible for mediating and enacting. When the time comes, you only need to listen to our command." Inspector General Zhang answered.

"When we reach Yunzhou, I may be able to get some helping hands." Xu Qi'an said.

"Helping hands?" The inspector general asked.

"I'll talk about that more when the time comes." Xu Qi'an didn't want to guarantee anything.

The inspector general nodded, not paying the matter much mind.

"Sir Zhang, what do you know about Yunzhou?" Xu Qi'an asked thoughtfully, "about the banditry issues, especially."

Inspector General Zhang thought about it for a while, before slowly saying: "There is a reason why Yunzhou is called the Bandit Province. This was recorded in the history books. But to talk about that we'd need to start from five hundred years ago, back to the time of the 'royal purge'..."

Xu Qi'an originally was unaware of the Wuzong emperor's usurping of the throne, but during the Sangpo case, he learned more and more about it.

"When the Wuzong Emperor lead his army against the capital, and later quickly taking all the other provinces, he met a hard stumbling block in Yunzhou, which resisted him fiercely. The then commisioner-in-chief of Yunzhou was a famed general, with great military might, and an even greater skill in defence. Even with Emperor Wuzong's strategic strength, he was unable to occupy Yunzhou.

"The two sides clashed in a war of attrition that lasted several years, to the point where the people couldn't get by, and the common folk in dire straits eventually took to the mountains, and became outlaws.

"Yunzhou has many mountains, easy to hold and hard to take. Its land is also fertile, and so it became the breeding ground for bandits and outlaws of all kinds. When Emperor Wuzong finally took over Yunzhou, he discovered that Yunzhou was filled with banidts.

"Several years of protracted war had hurt the Great Feng's spirit greatly, and we were unable to root the bandits out. Emperor Wuzong could only return back to the capital, planning to recover before acting.

“Later on, the court organised several expeditions to root out the bandits, but every time came back with heavy losses. And even though many bandits fell, many more sprang up in their place with the coming spring, eventually becoming the playground for wanted criminals and outcasts of the Jianghu.”

The inspector general sighed: “A grave disease is hard to cure.”

So this is a historical problem... if the founding emperor couldn't solve this situation, then it would be practically impossible for his successors to. Firstly their ability would be an issue, but secondly it is hard to pull oneself away from the pleasures of life. Xu Qi'an nodded slightly, indicating that he understood.

The three of them talked a little more, before parting.

...

Returning back to his room, as expected he startled awake Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao. Refining Qi martial artists' senses were extremely sharp, and any rustle of wind through grass was enough to alert them.

The two of them didn't pay much mind, and quickly went back to sleep again.

Xu Qi'an didn't sleep, rather lighting the lamp, sitting by the table, and taking out his small jade mirror.

【THREE: TWO, I've just received a message that the court has sent an inspector general to Yunzhou.】

It was indeed somewhat impolite to send messages in the middle of the night; all the members of the Earth Book Group Chat were startled awake, and all with different emotions picked up their earth books to look.

【FIVE: THREE you're such an arse, don't disturb my sleep in the middle of the night.】

The young woman from the Southern Marches voiced her protest.

The others didn't say anything, silently lurking.

【TWO: This to do with the Qi clique?】

【THREE: Good, the mole the Nightwatchers placed by the commissioner-in-chief discovered that the commissioner Yang Chuannan has been secretly helping the bandits, smuggling them military supplies, and helping the enemy. Oh right, this Yang Chuannan is the Qi clique representative in Yunzhou.】

【TWO: This is impossible. I don't know if Yang Chuannan is a Qi clique member or not, but I do know for certain that he is not helping the enemy, and smuggling military supplies to the bandits.】

Two's reaction is somewhat extreme... they know about Yang Chuannan, and is on good terms?

Xu Qi'an felt lucky that he didn't promise anything in front of Inspector General Zhang, otherwise he would be in hot water. At the same time, he secretly raised his guard. When he reached Yunzhou, he would have to pay attention to his identity, and not reveal anything.

First, he needed to figure out who Two was, then observe their relationship with Yang Chuannan, confirming if Two was a sheep or a wolf.

【FOUR: There's nothing to say that. The minister of industry has fallen, so he should have given over something right. TWO, think about it, the Qi clique conspired with the Church of the Warlock God, secretly supporting the bandits, but the Warlocks are thousands of li away in the capital, if they wanted to do anything they needed someone as messenger.

【If we can prove that Yang Chuannan is a Qi clique member, then he is certainly not innocent.】

【TWO: I'm a very good judge of character, Yang Chuannan is not that type of person.】

...TWO's being subjective here? Probably a woman, women are more emotional and opinionated. Xu Qi'an lampooned, but didn't say that out loud. After all, if Two is like a female boxing master, then she would be shaking to her core with anger.

【FIVE: THREE, why do you always have so much information? Are you an information broker?】

Five could not resist shooting off her mouth. She was somewhat discouraged; she had tried so hard and finally "sold" the information about the Gu god, and gotten a favour owed from everyone.

Yet this person just casually lobs out important information after important information, as if it was nothing.

As to Five's not very valuable comments, everyone tacitly ignored her message.

Xu Qi'an wrote somewhat mockingly: 【THREE: Eh, ONE should already know this message, did ONE not tell you all? Aiya, ONE you've lost it there.】

Number One is a schemer; the ones who don't talk are always the most treacherous and dark

【ONE: Fuck off.】

Xu Qi'an had originally thought that One would ignore him, but who knew that their reaction was so intense, opening with a mouth full of fragrance.

Have I offended ONE? I'm merely bantering around, is that really called for?

Xu Qi'an blankly stared at the mirror, somewhat miffed, and so elected to ignore One:

【THREE: TWO, if you don't believe me, when the inspector general gets there, you can co-operate with his party to investigate. If Yang Chuannan is innocent, then this would do him a favour too.】

【TWO: Ok.】

And now TWO is on the wagon with us! Xu Qi'an nodded in satisfaction.

【TWO: Right, how is Emperor Yuanjing doing?】

【THREE: Doing fairly well I'd think, why ask this?】

【TWO: Pah. The venerable has no eyes, allowing this damn emperor to live so long.】

The venerable has no eyes? This is an old grudge, I'm more and more curious of their identity. If I find out you have an official title... Xu Qi'an snickered quietly.

After successfully "asking after" Number Two, Xu Qi'an remembered the other reason why he started messaging.

【THREE: Oh right, I don't think I've told you what was actually sealed under Sangpo Lake.】

What was actually sealed under Sangpo lake!?!

Immediately, other members aside, even Number Five in her stupor suddenly became alert.

Chapter 182. Number One's Identity?

After the Sangpo case concluded, no one, not number Six, who was directly involved, or Three, One, and Nine all in the capital ever said anything about the sealed item under Sangpo lake.

To say that they weren't curious would be completely wrong, but after paying a visit to the Nightwatchers Constabulary, and having gained a deeper understanding of the case, Six refused to say anything more.

Everyone thought that the Buddhist-raised Six made a promise with the Nightwatchers.

In reality, Six just didn't want to relive the trauma.

As for Jinlian Daozhang, he was always a spectator, rarely starting conversation, only making quips here or there.

One liked to lurk, and they were a schemer, the others did not hold any hope for them. Silence from them made sense.

But today, finally, Number Three was willing to talk openly about this matter.

...The Sangpo case was dealt with by the Nightwatchers, and even in the Nightwatchers it must be a top classified secret. Perhaps the reason why Three only wanted to talk now is that he only recently received information on the case. Four instinctively started analysing him.

...Three is someone who likes to share information, he's a scholar with a magnanimous heart. The reason why he suspects Yang Chuannan is purely drawn from his analysis of the information, and not because of any personal likes or dislikes. The little bit of annoyance in Two's heart disappeared.

【FIVE: What do you want in exchange for this information.】

Number five instinctively asked.

... you idiot!

Four and Two thought simultaneously.

【THREE: None needed. As a member of the Heaven and Earth Society, it would be unbecoming of me to haggle gains and losses all the time, this piece of information is free for everyone.】

Especially considering that I brought this matter up, and I want to ask about Shenshu's identity, if I make another round of profit off that, it feels kinda scummy... mn, next time I have any precious information, I'll have to take payment. Xu Qi'an added on mentally.

Wow, Three's really generous, makes me feel bad about thinking of selling information all day... Five thought shamefully. Soon after though, a doubt cropped up in her mind:

Wait, isn't this the model that Three started off?

Xu Qi'an raised his head, glancing towards his sleeping colleagues, making sure they were ok, before continuing to message: 【THREE: It's a severed hand, a severed hand of a legendary expert.】

A severed hand!?!

This piece of information had a huge impact on the members of the Heaven and Earth Society. They had talked about the sealed item under Sangpo Lake in the past, and had deduced that the sealed item was a figure from five hundred years ago.

And from these associations, they had hypothesised that the mysterious expert who was sealed up had to be at least second rank.

A severed hand? How could a hand be sealed for five hundred years... Number Five's heart screamed out that it was impossible, and she was about to send a message in rebuttal, before suddenly remembering the revelation she had from the exploration into the abyss to see the Gu God, and thought of something:

【FIVE: If it's really a severed hand, then, it's owner must be incredibly powerful. All those who have been sealed are entities which are impossible to kill.】

The Nanjiang barbarian girl's words were like a ray of enlightenment striking everyone square in the head.

Indeed, anything that has been sealed must be unable to be killed. Otherwise, why go to all the bother?

【THREE: Maybe. Even the Nightwatchers Constabulary don't know the real identity of the severed hand; it was taken by the Yao people. I only know this much.】

But what did you mean by "true" identity then... The others in the Heaven and Earth Society criticised silently.

【TWO: We can list out all the legendary figures we know, and eliminate them one by one, perhaps we can deduce which one of those does this arm belong to.】

Just then, Jinlian Daozhang appeared. After lurking for so long, conversation about the sealed item finally piqued his interest:

【NINE: We can immediately exclude the Daoists.】

Without waiting for anyone else to ask, he explained: 【None of the three Daoist sects cultivate the body. If hypothetically it was some senior in the Daoist sects that was sealed, their spirits can remain for years and years, but their body must wither away. However, that severed hand's blood and qi are surging like a torrent, its demonic flames rising to heaven — this is not Daoist cultivation.】

Xu Qi'an butted in: 【THREE: The arcanists can also be excluded.】

Eh, Three is a Confucian disciple, so why has he first excluded the arcanists, and not the Confucians? Xu Qi'an's response confused Two and Four.

【FIVE: Shamans can also be excluded right? There's not been a first rank in our Shaman clans for hundreds of years.】

Only then, Xu Qi'an added: 【THREE: Similarly the Confucianists can be excluded, I am absolutely confident about this.】

Indeed, absolutely confident, since the owner of the hand is a monk, is a Buddhist.

【FOUR: Alright. Then this only leaves Martial artists, Yao, Warlocks, and Buddhists. The warlocks also do not focus on cultivating the body. Furthermore, I remember Three saying that the magical seal under Sangpo Lake had buddhist runes on it.

【From this we can deduce that the Buddhists participated in the sealing. I tend towards saying it is one of the Martial artists, the Buddhists, or the Yao race.】

A well justified analysis, Four is certainly one of the more intelligent ones in the Earth Book Group Chat... Xu Qi'an did not continue leading them, rather looking quietly from the side.

【FOUR: I've read a lot of history records, and of the famous figures five hundred years ago that also were allied with the Great Feng, there is only a first-generation Jianzheng.】

The vast majority of resources from that long ago have been hidden away, or destroyed, making it difficult to verify anything. However, there was something to be sure of: Five hundred years ago, even if the Great Feng did not lack talent, it was surely at the bottom of a steep decline, otherwise how could the Wuzong Emperor usurp the throne.

Given that case, the crown back then was unlikely to have two first ranks.

Thus martial artists were excluded for now...

One, who always liked lurking, broke their silence: 【Five hundred years is a time that cannot be overlooked. Apart from the coup of the Wuzong Emperor, everyone should not forget another event that happened.】

Four immediately responded: 【The sixty-year extermination?】

【ONE: The Buddhists contributed to the magical seal under Sangpo Lake, the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom were behind the Sangpo case, if we link them together ever so slightly, one can deduce that the owner of the severed hand is very likely to be the Empress of the Yao — the nine-tailed fox.】

This... Xu Qi'an was speechless. After all, One's analysis was backed by iron-clad evidence, and made a very convincing case. If he did not know the real owner of the hand, he would likely think that it was indeed the right answer.

...you've completely gone astray, it's not the nine-tailed fox, it's a damn monk!

Wait!

Xu Qi'an sharply caught a detail: *How did Number One know that the Wanyao Kingdom remnants were behind the case?*

From beginning to end, he had never said anything about the Wanyao kingdom remnants in the Earth Book Group Chat. Quite the opposite, Xu Qi'an had always thought that it was the Zhenbei King conspiring with the northern Yao.

After he had discovered the truth, he hadn't discussed it at all in the Heaven and Earth Society. After all, he needed to consider his character, a student of the Cloud Deer Academy had no reason to know such fine details.

And since the Sangpo case became a “criminal-less miscarriage of justice”, the case details were never announced, the dossier was stored in the Nightwatchers Constabulary, and Wei Yuan had only reported it to Emperor Yuanjing.

There are four possibilities from which One could have gotten this data. One: they heard it from Emperor Yuanjing's mouth. I'm not sure who the old Emperor would talk to, but undoubtedly it would only be those closest to him.

Two: they heard it from me. I've only told this to three people, being Wei Yuan, Jinlian Daozhang, and Princess Huaiqing.

Three: they heard it from these three people. One is someone high up in court, as well as Heaven and Earth Society member, so all three are a possibility.

Four: they learnt it from the dossier in the constabulary.

Xu Qi'an thought about this, simultaneously trying to lead the conversation on. He couldn't let them continue walking off the wrong path, otherwise all his hard work and hinting would be completely for nought.

【THREE: Why can't it be a Buddhist?】

A buddhist? Seeing this, everyone instinctively frowned, thinking hard.

【FIVE: Why would it be a buddhist?】

Five helped ask everyone else's question.

【THREE: Ha, I'm just guessing. I don't know much about the Buddhists. Even though there's a Qinglong Temple in the capital, it has no high rank Buddhists. That said, the Buddhists should have some arts which cultivate the body.

【Furthermore, I don't understand; if it really is the nine-tailed fox, why is she sealed under the Great Feng's Royal Sangpo Lake?】

The latter question was a secret hidden in history, none could reply, but the former could be answered by someone.

【SIX: The Buddhists have the warrior monk path, which aren't weaker than martial artists. Or we could say that they are the Buddhists' unique martial artists.】

Number Six, who had been silent for a long time since the death of his sect brother Henghui, finally surfaced again.

The Buddhists do have two systems... Xu Qi'an already understood that somewhat.

【FIVE: Warrior monks are the Buddhists' unique martial artists?】

【SIX: Indeed. There are two systems under the Buddhist house. One of them starts at rank eight, Warrior Monk. Warrior Monks do not need to read texts and study, they don't even need to keep their monastic vows, and only need to cultivate strength, and not a Buddhist heart. However, as to what comes after an eighth rank warrior monk, I do not know.】

A Buddhist disciple that doesn't need to keep vows, doesn't need to read texts? The other members' heads were filled with fog.

Don't need to keep their vows? Does that mean they can sleep with people? That's a new piece of trivia... Xu Qi'an knew about the existence of the Warrior Monk path, but this was the first time he had heard that they did not even need to keep vows.

Next time I can try to invite Hengyuan to the Jiaofangsi, and get him a chick...

Xu Qi'an continued to prod along the conversation: 【If the person that had his hand sealed was a Buddhist, then, we only need to look at the Buddhist histories five hundred years ago to find his true identity, right. I'm personally rather interested in this, so if anyone has relevant information, you can sell it to me.】

Everyone in the Heaven and Earth Society expressed that they would keep an eye out for him.

Whew... Master Shenshu, I've tried my best. Xu Qi'an let out a long breath. For the mystery that is Shenshu's identity, Xu Qi'an was currently laying out the foundations, and not in a hurry to investigate further.

At a conservative estimate, Shenshu's rank should be first rank, but as to how strong a first rank master really is, Xu Qi'an had absolutely no reference point. Perhaps even the well-read, experienced Jinlian Daozhang would have no idea, as after all the Earth Sect's leader is only second rank.

That said, even though his body was split up, even though he had been sealed for five hundred years, his vitality and spirit were still not extinguished. This miraculous ability to Xu Qi'an was already in the realm of gods and demons.

He might as well be a natural disaster in human form.

Thus the eighth rank Refining Qi Xu Qi'an, was certainly not in a hurry to investigate further.

On that note, the members of the Heaven and Earth Society come from all four corners of the world — except for the western realms. Is this just a coincidence, or does Jinlian Daozhang have some other reason for it?

After a while, seeing that no one else was talking, number four messaged: 【Talking about the Buddhists reminded me of some interesting matters. THREE, this concerns your Confucianists. 】

Chapter 183. Blood Glow

What do I have to do with the Confucianists, I'm only a Nightwatcher putting on a confucian skin... Xu Qi'an thought mockingly, before straightening his expression, and staring intently at the jade mirror.

Not long after, words appeared on the surface, as Four's message came over: 【Once upon a time I travelled the western realms. The people there generally were illiterate, backwards and uneducated; they hardly knew what "ritual" meant. However, the locals were still enthusiastic hosts. They enthusiastically welcomed me, as a travelling swordsman, but when I told them that I was a "scholar", their attitudes turned completely upside-down.

【They hurled abuse, threats, and tried to expel me, leaving me with no choice but to leave. Afterwards, never again did I reveal my scholar identity.】

...is this the so-called resentment underachievers had towards the top of the class? Xu Qi'an did not comment, waiting for the following message.

【FOUR: I thought that the western realms just hated scholars, but later I realised that they didn't hate scholars, but rather the confucianists — proper orthodox confucianists. This reminded me of a passage I read in a history book once. About five hundred years ago, the Buddhist faith was flourishing in the Great Feng, and they spread their faith everywhere.

【But good things didn't last forever, and not a hundred years later, the court started to eradicate the Buddhists. The person who started this policy was the prime minister of the time, who had another title — the dean of the Cloud Deer Academy.】

The scholars of old almost all came from the Cloud Deer Academy, the split in confucian orthodoxy only came around two centuries ago... Xu Qi'an wrote: 【That's it?】

The Great Feng was the land of the confucianists, if the Buddhist house wanted to spread their teachings into the central plains, it would be only expected that the confucianists would try to stop them. In the same vein, the western realms' prejudice against scholars also made sense.

There was no gossip here.

【FOUR: Heh, THREE, you're getting idle.】

Xu Qi'an: “???”

Shall I bite my nails, and make a “head trembling” scene?[^1]

【FOUR: Or rather that you're too busy revising for the spring exams, and haven't had time to read history? What I'm saying is, when enacting the Buddhist eradication policy, that prime minister had said: *If buddha does not die, then all will be buddha; my mandate is thus, to break the Buddha's path.*

【From then until now, I have yet to understand its true meaning.】

If buddha does not die, then all will be buddha; my mandate is thus, to break the buddha's path... what? Xu Qi'an's head was filled with fog.

【FIVE: Perhaps it was to rouse the spirits of the people?】

Well played, Five! Xu Qi'an laughed.

【ONE: No, the third rank Confucian is called “Mandate Seeker”. “My mandate is thus...” are certainly no jesting words. FOUR's message has reminded me of several details of that event — that prime minister was called Du Zhongshu, and after he eradicated buddhism, he became a third rank Mandate Seeker. To put it another way, his “Mandate” was to eradicate buddhism from Feng.】

Reaching third rank “Mandate Seeker” after eradicating buddhism? Xu Qi'an recalled something that Scholar Zhang Shen had mentioned once to him off-handedly: the Confucian mandate seeker was a process of “finding one's destiny in life”, hence the “mandate”.

A mandate must be a monumental goal, that one must attain with righteousness and vigour... to reach mandate seeker after eradicating buddhism, this is getting interesting... this suggests that eradicating the religion was a righteous, proactive thing to do?

Xu Qi'an pondered as he messaged: 【A Mandate Seeker is similar to a Buddhist's "great ambition". To enter Mandate Seeker by eradicating buddhism, means that eradicating buddhism was the right thing to do.】

With the backing of a confucian scholar like Three, every realised the strangeness in this statement. *If buddha does not die, then all will be buddha...* perhaps this wasn't just said in jest.

Perhaps there was something deeper hidden behind the veil, and not something so simple as "territorial conflict."

For a long time, no one talked, as if they were all pondering what could be behind this action. After many minutes, number Two said:

【TWO: THREE, how many high ranked martials are in this inspectorate envoy?】

【THREE: On the surface, there is only one Gold Gong. As for clandestine operations, I do not know.】

Oh of course, "only" one Gold Gong... Two lampooned.

Anyone who remotely knew about the Nightwatchers knew that Gold Gongs were fourth rank martial artists. On the battlefield, a fourth rank martial was worth a thousand battle-hardened warriors.

Under the category of "mortal men", the fourth ranks with their "Intent" were the top of the top.

Above them were third ranks, those that could resurrect from a single broken limb — but they were no longer considered "mortal".

If my entire brigade, me included, went up against a Gold Gong, then mutual destruction would be our best outcome.

Number Two sighed.

There was another long moment of silence, and only when he was sure that all the other members had gone offline, Xu Qi'an stowed away his little mirror, and left his room. Standing at the side of the deck, his gaze towards the vast river, he emptied the waterfall that had been building in his bladder.

"Have you not seen — that the waters of the Yellow River come from upon heaven, surging into the ocean, three thousand li it flies down towards earth...[^2] high it shakes nine heavens, low it fills nine seas... Guanyin sits on her lotus flower, the Queen Mother sinks down low... come today forty eight thousand years, yet no people come through the passes of Qin, the son of Xu has a way for birds, that crosses the summit of E'Mei mount... and return![^3]"

Fastening his belt, he returned to his room.

...

The next day, as the sky slowly lightened, Xu Qi'an awoke. Looking left and right, he saw his two colleagues already awake, deep in meditation, refining qi.

Everyone's so hard-working, so full of vigour every day... Xu Qi'an sat up, and stretched lazily.

Refining Vitality, Qi, and Spirit were three parts of a whole. When qi overflowed from the top, middle, and lower *dantian*, then one's spirit would suddenly surge in strength. This is when one would begin to practice visualisation, and prepare to cross into Refining Spirit.

Xu Qi'an's qi had long since filled his *dantian*, and was close to overflowing. Added to his daily visualisation meditation, his spirit grew with every passing hour. What he lacked was just the right opportunity which he could use to break through.

How could this opportunity come, Xu Qi'an did not know; Wei Yuan hadn't told him, as Daddy Wei had not realised that Xu Qi'an's cultivation was progressing at such a frightening pace.

He was still under the impression that his favourite little Bronze Gong was still building his qi.

Sensing that Xu Qi'an was awake, Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng stopped their meditation, and the former said:

"After this trip to Yunzhou, the constabulary will give us a bonus, I'll finally have enough dowry money to marry."

Zhu Guangxiao had a childhood sweetheart who lived neighbouring him. The two of them had deep, sincere feelings for each other. Like a pimp and a young sprout — hand in hand.

But his sweetheart's father asked for a hundred tael dowry from him, otherwise he wouldn't even consider it.

Zhu Guangxiao's monthly salary was only five taels of silver, adding onto that some under-the-table deals, he could really only hope to make around eighty taels in a year. However, he also had to attend social gatherings, maintain his standard of living, and the odd brothel trip... hence he could really only save around thirty taels of silver.

It was already pretty impressive; brothel time was already a hard requirement — even ordinary people demanded brothel services, let alone a vitality-filled masculine-qi martial artists.

Hell... don't be planting flags. Someone like you, I've seen hundreds if not thousands of on telly in my previous life... Xu Qi'an rolled his eyes.

"Congratulations! Wishing Guangxiao an early marriage." Song Tingfeng said, before glancing at Xu Qi'an, just happening to spot a purple perfume pouch at his waist, with white lotus flowers embroidered on it: "Ningyan, did Fuxiang give you this?"

"Nope!" Xu Qi'an let him take it off.

"Rascal, do you also have a soon to be wed lover?" Song Tingfeng's thin eyes widened, as he said sourly.

"Nope." Xu Qi'an took back the pouch, and laid back down. Putting the pouch under his nose, he hummed a light tune: "She's just my sister, my sister said that purple had great charm."

"Why don't you marry?" Zhu Guangxiao expressed his confusion.

From his point of view, not only did Xu Qi'an enjoy great appreciation from Duke Wei, but also received two thousand taels of gold from His Majesty, his future (and his money's future) were full of flowers and rainbows.

And he was at that age anyway.

"He's like me, a lone wanderer." Song Tingfeng commented.

"Shoo, we're not the same." Xu Qi'an lounged on the bed, his head resting on his hands, sighing: "Let me get used to this a bit more."

All in all, he had only come to the Great Feng for three months, his heart hadn't yet settled here, and gotten used to life. Hence he lounged around the Jiaofangsi, lingering on Fuxiang's warm comforting chest, and had not a single thought of marrying and settling down.

Zhu Guangxiao nodded lightly, suggesting: "This depends on what you want in a wife."

"What I want..." Xu Qi'an thought for a whole: "Long wavy hair."

"You certainly have a strange request." Song Tingfeng frowned.

Xu Qi'an glanced over: "That was three requests."

After washing and brushing, Xu Qi'an had breakfast, and then went to see Jiang Lyuzhong.

"What is it?" Jiang Lyuzhong sat by the table, looking at a map of Yunzhou. His eyes, like those of eagles, made one feel great pressure when looked at.

"I would like to ask Gold Gong Jiang about cultivation." Xu Qi'an picked up a small cake, and stuffed it in his mouth: "How do I get to refining spirit?"

Xu Qi'an had previously thought that advancing in cultivation was a gradual and natural process.

When one accumulated enough, they could naturally advance to Refining Spirit.

But from Chu Caiwei's requirements for advancing to Master of Alchemy, he was inspired to examine the Martial Artist System, discovering that advancing from the Refining Vitality to the Refining Qi also had a requirement: one must not lose their virginity!

Jiang Lyuzhong laughed and said, "It's very simple. When your mental strength reaches a certain level, your forehead will ache, and that's when you're ready to advance to Refining Spirit. As for the method, well, you cannot sleep for ten days."

"What? Not sleep for ten days? Is that serious? Won't you die from that?"

Seeing Xu Qi'an's bewildered expression, Jiang Lyuzhong explained, "You heard correctly. Not sleeping for ten days. If you make it through, you'll advance to Refining Spirit. If you don't, at best you'll fall unconscious, at worst you'll die from mental exhaustion. On the road of the martial artist, every level is a life-and-death test."

"Why must one not sleep for ten days?" Xu Qi'an asked, puzzled.

"When you're in the Refining Vitality stage, you often push your physical limits. Each time you break through these limits, your physical strength increases. But do you know the limits of your primordial spirit?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head.

"The best way to break through the limits of your primordial spirit is to stay awake. Ten days is just a rough standard; everyone's limit is different. When you try to advance to Refining Spirit in the future, you'll have firsthand experience."

"Won't the body be unable to take it?"

"That's why the Refining Vitality and Refining Qi are foundational for Refining Spirit, including daily visualisations to strengthen your spirit. This increases your chances of advancing to Refining Spirit." Jiang Lyuzhong chuckled and added, "You're still early in your journey. The most important thing on the path of martial arts is the will to endure hardships and not aim too high."

"Gold Gong Jiang is right," Xu Qi'an nodded in agreement. "I have already reached the peak of Refining Qi."

Jiang Lyuzhong: "???"

He stared at Xu Qi'an in disbelief for a few seconds and then said unhappily, "Don't joke around. I remember when you joined the Nightwatchers, you were still in Refining Vitality. How could someone reach the peak of the Refining Qi in less than three months... it can't be true?"

Xu Qi'an shrugged. "If it weren't true, why would I ask you this? Well, I'll take my leave now."

Xu Qi'an left Jiang Lyuzhong's room, leaving the Gold Gong sitting alone at the table, muttering to himself, "This doesn't make sense, this doesn't make sense...."

"Does Lord Wei know about this?"

...

Six days passed in a flash, and Xu Qi'an's first experience of a long voyage on a boat was summed up in one word: Fuck!

On the deck, Song Tingfeng listlessly gazed at the river, watching the passing grain transport ships, and said, "We should reach Yuzhou by tomorrow. Gold Gong Jiang promised us a day of rest. I'm sick of eating fish."

"Yuzhou is famous for its rich iron mines and its prosperity. The beauties at the Jiaofangsi must be very charming," a Bronze Gong chimed in.

Xu Qi'an didn't care whether the beauties at the Jiaofangsi were charming or not; he just wanted to get off the boat as soon as possible and have a good meal.

In the depth of winter, vegetables and fruits were already scarce, let alone while floating on water. He had been eating fish every meal for this entire period, and now, just seeing fish made him nauseous, almost to the point of developing an eating disorder.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an, who was leaning on the railing, inadvertently caught sight of a government ship coming towards them.

On the deck of the government ship, a few clerks in black uniforms also noticed Xu Qi'an's ship. Upon seeing the Bronze Gongs in Nightwatcher uniforms on the deck, the clerks visibly panicked and instinctively stepped back.

They quickly steadied themselves, maintaining their composure, but did not glance this way again.

...The instinctive panic upon seeing us is a sign of a guilty conscience. Although they tried to recover and remain calm, their averted eyes only highlight their guilt... Are they naturally afraid of the Nightwatchers?

Old detective Xu Qi'an thought suspiciously.

The clerks' reaction on the other ship was exactly the classic guilty behaviour he had studied in psychology.

To be sure, he decided to confirm it.

Xu Qi'an reached into his chest pocket and lightly tapped the back of a jade mirror, taking out the "magic book" he received from the Confucian academy, tearing off a page that recorded the Qi Watching Technique.

The "magic book" contained mostly Qi Watching Techniques. On the day they escorted Jinwu Guard Captain Zhou Chixiong to the capital, Xu Qi'an had thick-skinnedly asked Zhang Shen for more techniques to replenish the gradually depleted book.

Chu Caiwei had been present at the time and had become a major contributor to the skills.

As for why it was mostly the Qi Observing Technique, it was because the technique was simple and easy to record.

"Hiss..."

As the page burned, a clear light shot out from Xu Qi'an's eyes as he looked towards the official ship ahead.

He saw a sticky, bright red glow of blood.

According to the Qi Observing Technique, those who have killed will be stained with a blood glow for a period of time after the act.

Chapter 184. Barge Inspection

Waves upon waves of blood... Everyone on that government ship is a villain... Xu Qi'an was startled.

But he didn't make a rash judgment, because river pirates often caused trouble on the waterways, and these officials might have just repelled some attempting to plunder them.

"What kind of ship is that, and why is it different from ours?" Xu Qi'an casually asked his colleague as he watched the approaching government ship.

There were many experienced Bronze Gongs present, knowledgeable and well-versed in such matters. After some recognition, they replied, "That's a barge. Judging by the flag, it seems to be from Yuzhou."

A barge, a large flat-bottomed vessel, often used for carrying goods.

Xu Qi'an gave an "oh" in response, his eyes flickering slightly as he continued to ask, "Are there river pirates near Yuzhou?"

Song Tingfeng laughed sarcastically, placing a hand on Xu Qi'an's shoulder, "We are less than half a day's journey from the Yuzhou checkpoint. Have you ever seen bandits robbing right at the constabulary's doorstep?"

"Then there's no problem," Xu Qi'an nodded, his tone as if confirming something.

"What do you mean, no problem?"

"No problem in earning some merits" he glanced at Song Tingfeng, then quickly said as the two ships were about to pass each other, "Tingfeng, go back to the cabin immediately and find Gold Gong Jiang, tell him there's an urgent matter."

He then scanned the seven or eight Bronze Gongs on the deck, saying sternly, "There's something wrong with that ship. Follow my lead."

After speaking, he shouted towards the barge on the side, "Stop the ship!"

His voice rolled across the river.

The officials on the barge completely ignored him, pretending not to hear. Some crew members even quietly adjusted the sail's angle, making the barge veer away from the Nightwatchers' vessel.

At this, the other Bronze Gongs also sensed something was wrong. Before they could speak, they saw Xu Qi'an prop himself against the railing, the deck beneath his feet cracking with a "crunch" as he shot out like a cannonball.

In an instant, he spanned dozens of meters, landing steadily on the barge's deck.

"Crack..."

The sound of breaking deck continued as seven or eight Bronze Gongs leapt up one after another, using their exaggerated jumping ability and surging Qi to also leap onto the barge.

Seeing the group of Bronze Gongs "invade" the barge, the faces of several officials on the deck changed slightly, their hands quietly moving to the hilts of their blades at their waists.

"Gentlemen..." A bearded man in a constabulary officer's uniform, wearing a tall hat and black boots, hurried out of the cabin.

He glanced around at the Bronze Gongs on the deck and cupped his fists, "What can I do for you?"

Xu Qi'an didn't speak, carefully observing their micro-expressions and subtle movements. Zhu Guangxiao said in a deep voice:

"Which constabulary are you from?"

"We are constables from the Canal Transport Office, escorting a batch of iron ore to the capital," the bearded man replied. Their uniforms were adorned with wave patterns, indicative of the Canal Transport Office.

Yuzhou was rich in iron ore. Salt and iron were crucial national resources — in short they were strategic materials and major fiscal contributors.

The Bronze Gongs were not surprised by this and turned to look at Xu Qi'an, puzzled by his sudden interception of the ship.

Xu Qi'an squinted his eyes, noticing a detail: despite everything, this barge was still sailing and hadn't anchored.

"Guangxiao, make them stop the ship," Xu Qi'an ordered sternly.

Zhu Guangxiao immediately went to the stern and kicked the massive, heavy anchor into the water. The barge slowly came to a stop.

When his silent colleague returned, Xu Qi'an questioned the constable, "Why didn't you stop the boat earlier?"

"Uh..." The bearded man looked troubled and whispered, "Please wait a moment, my lords."

He returned to the cabin and soon came back with a few folded silver notes, discreetly handing them over with a fawning smile.

"I understand that whenever we see the Nightwatchers, we must show our respect. I was being foolish earlier, trying to get away with it. I deserve to die for my mistake. Please forgive me, milords."

Xu Qi'an glanced at the notes; they were all in denominations of fifty, totalling about three hundred taels of silver.

So, he thinks we stopped the boat to take a bribe? The Nightwatchers present realised this, finding it both amusing and irritating.

While the Nightwatchers weren't entirely clean, they weren't corrupt to the extent of exploiting every opportunity. However, their reputation was indeed tarnished, thanks to the civil officials who continuously smeared them, portraying the Nightwatchers as Wei Yuan's claws, committing acts of cruelty, corruption, and injustice.

What scholars excelled at most is using their pens to attack others.

"Ningyan..." Zhu Guangxiao frowned and looked at Xu Qi'an.

Like the others, he didn't believe Xu Qi'an stopped the barge for money. This was the man who had once decapitated a Silver Gong for some unrelated woman. Whether he was liked or not was one thing, but his character was trustworthy.

Seeing no one accepting the silver notes for a long time, the bearded man's heart sank. He didn't think he had handled things incorrectly, but it seemed the Nightwatchers weren't buying it.

"Take me to the cabin to have a look," Xu Qi'an stepped forward, staring at the bearded man.

At this moment, Xu Qi'an stood in front of all the Bronze Gongs. His right hand casually moved behind his back, quickly making a subtle hand gesture.

The gesture was slight but noticeable to the Bronze Gongs behind him, who tensed up. This was a professional sign from the Nightwatchers, meaning: Prepare for action.

“Accompany me for an inspection,” Xu Qi’an demanded.

“Sure, please,” the bearded man agreed without hesitation.

...He agreed too readily, didn’t he? Normally, he should protest that river transport affairs were none of the Nightwatchers’ business. Hmm, or maybe he’s just scared... Xu Qi’an thought, leading his colleagues to follow the bearded man into the cabin, descending the narrow stairs to the hold.

Lighting candles one by one, the bearded man led the Nightwatchers to inspect the crates filled with ores.

A Bronze Gong grabbed a handful of fine iron ore, clicking his tongue in appreciation, “This is all high-quality iron ore, well-sorted.”

The bearded man laughed a little, by way of a response.

The Bronze Gong quietly dropped the iron ore and nudged Xu Qi’an’s waist with the hilt of his knife, signalling with his eyes.

Xu Qi’an said, “Continue your inspection.”

He walked aside with the Bronze Gong and whispered, “What is it?”

The Bronze Gong lowered his voice, “The ore is too finely ground, and the quality is too good.”

Xu Qi’an didn’t understand, “It’s headed to the capital; what’s the issue?”

The Bronze Gong glanced at the others not far away, then turned back, speaking softly, “A few years ago, I investigated an embezzlement case in the Ministry of Industry, which involved iron ore. The ore’s weight is calculated, not its quality.

“Officials looking to profit for themselves would mix in gravel or inferior ore to increase the weight. As long as it wasn’t excessive, there would be no problems.”

...So, the quality of the iron ore here is too good... Xu Qi’an nodded.

After the inspection, they found nothing anomalous, the group returned to the cabin. Xu Qi’an made another request, “Show me your documents.”

The bearded man obediently took out the documents issued by the Transport Office. After confirming there were no issues, Xu Qi’an asked, “Didn’t encounter any problems on the way?”

“How could we? We’ve just left Yuzhou,” the bearded man replied.

Ha, then explain the green light... no, the blood light on your head?

Xu Qi’an walked around observing the cabin. The bearded man accompanied him the entire time, answering every question with an unusually good attitude.

They reached the kitchen, where four cooks sat silently on small wooden stools, watching Xu Qi’an and his group.

The kitchen’s baskets were filled with seasonal vegetables, looking quite fresh.

Xu Qi'an laughed, "Now, seeing green vegetables makes my eyes light up. We've been eating fish on the boat for days, it's both fishy and unpalatable."

He glanced at the four cooks and said, "Right?"

One of the cooks glanced at the bearded man, exchanged a look, and understood the hint. He showed a humble smile and said, "Yes, the fish in the river inevitably has a muddy taste. Sir is most certainly used to finer fares, but we who live on the water all year round are used to it."

"Oh, you don't know how to remove the fishy taste." Xu Qi'an nodded with a smile.

Hmm? The four cooks sensed something strange from Xu Qi'an's meaningful smile.

The bearded man also sensed it and tentatively said, "Sir..."

Before he could finish, his jaw was struck from below by Xu Qi'an, causing his teeth to clatter and shatter.

Immediately, Xu Qi'an, moving at incredible speed, punched his chest twice, bang bang... the force penetrated through his back, tearing his uniform.

The bearded man was sent flying, crashing into the wall, and collapsed weakly to the ground.

Xu Qi'an, who had struck suddenly, paid him no more attention. He turned around and kicked, breaking one cook's ribs, then with a combination of strength and speed, shattered the chest bones of the remaining three cooks.

The entire process took no more than five seconds.

Despite this, the fight in the kitchen still attracted the attention of those outside.

Xu Qi'an shouted, "Arrest everyone on the ship, leave them alive."

The Bronze Gongs, already alerted by hand signals, reacted swiftly and decisively, knocking down one worker after another.

For the Nightwatchers, who were all at the Refining Qi stage, subduing a group of ordinary workers was no harder than Xu Qi'an defeating Xu Lingyin.

At this moment, Xu Qi'an sensed a powerful aura landing on the deck. To prevent the bearded man from escaping by jumping into the water, he dragged him out of the cabin and onto the deck.

Jiang Lyuzhong frowned, silently watching him.

Xu Qi'an glanced towards his own ship and saw Inspector Zhang had also been alerted. He stood on the deck, watching intently, with a serious expression.

This anchored ship was also a government vessel, belonging to the Yuzhou government. Xu Qi'an's actions were akin to those of water bandits. Without a plausible reason, this matter would be difficult to handle.

"What are you doing?" Jiang Lyuzhong asked, glancing at the bearded man in Xu Qi'an's hand.

He immediately recognized the uniform of the Transport Office.

"This ship has a problem, but it's hard to say exactly what," Xu Qi'an explained.

"This is an official transport ship of the Yuzhou Transport Office, escorting iron ore?" Jiang Lyuzhong asked.

"Yes."

Jiang Lyuzhong nodded and asked seriously, "How did you discover something was wrong?"

Chapter 185. Embezzlement

"I used the Sitianjian's Qi-watching technique to observe them. All of them have a blood aura," Xu Qi'an said.

In the context of Qi Watching, anyone with experience, especially a Gold Gong, would undoubtedly know what a blood aura signifies.

"How do you know Qi-Watching?" Jiang Lyuzhong asked, before turning towards the government ship, extending his hand towards a white-robed arcanist who had come out to watch the commotion.

An invisible force distorted the air, pulling the flailing white-cloak onto the ship.

"Check their qi," Jiang Lyuzhong said gently.

The white-cloak frowned, expressing his displeasure. Despite facing a high-ranking martial artist, his pride as an arcanist gave him the confidence to stand firm.

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up," Xu Qi'an urged.

"Oh, oh..." The white-cloaked arcanist obediently nodded, and after a moment of silence, a clear light shone in his eyes.

He carefully observed the cabin, then retracted the light and said, "Indeed, their blood aura is overwhelming."

Jiang Lyuzhong's eyes sharpened instantly. To be thorough, he asked, "Any other abnormalities?"

"Yes!"

Xu Qi'an, confident in his actions, continued, "There are a few other suspicious points: One, there are signs of a recent fight in the cabin.

"Two, these people aren't seasoned boatmen because they don't even know how to remove the muddy taste from river fish.

Three, their guilty conscience is too high. From their initial panic upon meeting us to their complete compliance with all my demands without any resentment... Hah, from my understanding of officials, they're usually a tough bunch. Even if they wouldn't dare offend a Nightwatcher, if they were truly innocent, they should have complained a bit. After all, the Transport Office doesn't fall under the Nightwatchers' jurisdiction.

"Their behaviour, eager to appease us with whatever we wanted, is too suspicious."

Not knowing how to remove the fishy taste—even remembering such details—Xu Ningyan is indeed a genius in investigation. Jiang Lyuzhong marveled inwardly but maintained a calm exterior as he nodded, "Well considered, good job."

He then asked, "This place is only half a day's journey from Yuzhou. They have a blood aura and have taken lives, but how did they manage to kill near Yuzhou?"

"At night," Xu Qi'an replied.

Jiang Lyuzhong pondered for a moment and understood. Based on the current time, this ship had set off from Yuzhou during the night.

Killing under the cover of darkness wouldn't attract attention.

Moments later, the Nightwatchers gathered everyone on the ship onto the deck, all tightly bound.

Zhu Guangxiao clasped his fists and reported, "There are a total of sixty-two people on the ship, all accounted for."

Jiang Lyuzhong nodded, looked at the bearded man disguised as a Transport Office captain, and said sternly, "Wake him up."

The awakening process was rough. Zhu Guangxiao slapped the bearded man awake, causing him to moan in agony.

This man, disguised as a Transport Office constable, scanned his surroundings and quickly realized his predicament, his face turning ashen.

He still couldn't believe that he had been exposed. Where did it go wrong?

"I ask, you answer. If you lie or hide anything, you'll lose a finger," Jiang Lyuzhong's emotionless voice rang out.

The bearded man looked up and, upon meeting those penetrating eyes that seemed to see through his soul, shivered and prostrated himself on the ground.

"Your real identity!"

"This commoner is called Fang He, a wanderer in the Jianghu, I formed a group called the Yellow Flag Gang in Yuzhou to make a living."

"Does making a living include killing government officials and seizing imperial iron ore?"

"No, no, sir... I was just hired to do the job. The one who directed me to do this was the Director of the Transport Office in Yuzhou. He informed us that tonight, there would be a barge headed to the capital carrying iron ore. He instructed us to kill the ship's guards and seize the iron ore."

Who the hell is that... director of shit out of my arse... Xu Qi'an's mind was full of questions.

Since joining the Nightwatchers and gradually getting involved in official matters, Xu Qi'an often found himself confused by the myriad of official titles.

The Director of the Transport Office orchestrated all this? The Nightwatchers exchanged silent glances, all showing shock.

Even Jiang Lyuzhong's expression became serious.

It was clear they were dealing with a major case of embezzlement.

"This doesn't make sense," Xu Qi'an shook his head, raising a question, "Why have you kill and seize the ship? If the goal was just to steal the iron ore, it would be much safer to cooperate with officials. Working with you is riskier."

Jiang Lyuzhong glanced at him and explained, "The Transport Offices in each province are divided into the Shore Patrol Division and the Transport Division. The Shore Patrol Division manages the canal, including the inspection and storage of grain, salt, and iron. The Transport Division handles the escort duties."

So, the Transport Division officials could only act while at sea... Xu Qi'an nodded, "So, to completely cover up the crime, they made the ship and its guards disappear? That way, the Transport Division would also appear to be victims."

Jiang Lyuzhong continued questioning, "After seizing the iron ore, how would you handle it?"

The bearded man shook his head, "We were only responsible for delivering the iron ore to Yunzhou. The route was from Yuzhou, via Shazhou, and to Yunzhou, where someone would take over."

Yunzhou?!

Jiang Lyuzhong's expression changed immediately.

Damn, Yunzhou again... Right, the Transport Office is under the Ministry of Industry, controlled by the Qi clique. The Qi clique is colluding with the Church of the Warlock God, secretly supplying military materials to Yunzhou... This all adds up. But transporting iron ore... the implications are terrifying.

"Who is your contact? From your tone, this isn't the first time you've done this."

"This year... we've done it three times. In total, we've transported a hundred thousand pounds of iron ore to Yunzhou."

Jiang Lyuzhong asked a few more questions, then instructed, "Stay on this barge, change course to follow us to Yuzhou. Keep a close watch on these criminals."

He then said to Xu Qi'an, "Bring him and come with me back to the ship."

This time, Xu Qi'an didn't rely on his own strength to return to the official ship. Instead, a burst of qi carried him, floating in the air, following Jiang Lyuzhong as they flew across several dozen meters, landing beside Inspector Zhang.

"What happened? Why did you intercept an official barge?" Inspector Zhang asked repeatedly.

"There was indeed an incident..." Jiang Lyuzhong made a gesture inviting him, "Please, Inspector General, come inside."

Jiang Lyuzhong recounted Xu Qi'an's findings and Fang He's confession to Inspector Zhang. Then, in Inspector Zhang's presence, he re-interrogated Fang He.

After hearing Fang He's testimony, Inspector Zhang's expression grew solemn.

"Besides the Director of the Transport Division, which other officials were involved?"

"I... I don't know..."

Inspector Zhang looked at Xu Qi'an, "Take him away first, then come back. We have some matters to discuss with you."

This statement implied that Inspector Zhang already regarded Xu Qi'an as a peer he could consult with, rather than a mere subordinate.

Xu Qi'an escorted Fang He out of the room, and handed him over to Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, instructing them to keep a close watch on him. He then returned, closing the door behind him.

Inspector Zhang watched him return, his expression serious. "What do you make of this?"

"Your subordinate has a question," Xu Qi'an replied.

When Jiang Lyuzhong and Inspector Zhang looked at him, Xu Qi'an shared his thoughts, "The Minister of Industry has already fallen from power. As a member of the Qi clique, he should be lying low and retracting his claws to observe the situation. Why, then, is the Transport Office in Yuzhou continuing to send iron ore to Yunzhou at such a critical moment?"

"Furthermore, even though bandits in Yunzhou are rampant, they are ultimately nothing more than local warlords. It's understandable for the Ministry of Works to send military supplies, cannons, and other equipment, but secretly transporting iron ore to Yunzhou... Can the bandits even handle that? What is their intention?"

Inspector Zhang closed his eyes, lightly tapping the table with his fingers, murmuring, "The Qi clique is colluding with the Church of the Warlock God... supplying Yunzhou with military equipment, cannons, and now iron ore... Salt, iron, and gunpowder are prohibited from being exported by the Great Feng..."

He paused, then suddenly opened his eyes wide with a look of horror, spitting out one word: "Rebellion."

The Qi clique was massively supplying Yunzhou with military necessities, and now with the addition of iron ore, if not for rebellion, it was hard to think of any other explanation.

If it was just supporting bandits, why go to such lengths?

Realizing this, Inspector Zhang stood up and paced the room, glancing occasionally at Jiang Lyuzhong and Xu Qi'an.

"Xu Ningyan, you've given me another headache... encountering this matter will undoubtedly delay our journey."

Although he said this, his tone and expression showed no sign of blame, instead, there was a strange mix of concern and excitement.

Jiang Lyuzhong said, "Reporting this to the capital will be a significant achievement for you, sir."

"And you deserve credit for this as well," Inspector Zhang said, patting Xu Qi'an's shoulder firmly.

Regardless of the outcome of the Yunzhou trip, the mere fact that Xu Qi'an uncovered this case was a major achievement. Even if they accomplished nothing in Yunzhou, this would more than make up for it, and even bring merit.

All of this was due to Xu Qi'an's keen "sense."

After a moment, Inspector Zhang calmed down, sat back in his chair, and considered the current situation. He had three options:

First, pretend this incident never happened and continue to Yunzhou, avoiding complications.

Second, disguise some men as the Transport Office's escort guards, forcing Fang He to lead the way and meet the contact in Yunzhou.

Third, head to the Yuzhou Transport Office to handle this case and apprehend the mastermind.

The first option was immediately ruled out. The second option would be too time-consuming, as traveling by water to Yunzhou, via Shazhou, would take at least ten days to half a month, which didn't fit their schedule. The Yuzhou Transport Office was a much closer lead.

Inspector Zhang voiced his choice and received unanimous approval from Jiang Lyuzhong and Xu Qi'an.

At that moment, Inspector Zhang felt that having their support was enough.

...

At noon, the government ship arrived at the largest transport dock in Yuzhou, slowly docking.

As soon as the barge docked, it drew the attention of the dockworkers, who swarmed around. However, upon seeing the heavily armed Huben Guards escorting the Transport Office's men, they retreated in fear.

Leaving some Guards to watch over the ship, Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong, along with a large contingent, headed straight to the Yuzhou Transport Office.

Chapter 186. Deduction

The Transport Office was divided into two departments: the Shore Patrol Division and the Transport Division. The highest-ranking official was the Transport Commissioner, of fourth rank, overseeing nearly a thousand personnel both inside and outside the office.

"Of all the government offices, the Transport Office is the most lucrative. In the 20th year of Yuanjing, the court sold official positions, most of which were related to transport," Inspector Zhang explained as he led the way, his tone grave.

"In the 22nd year of Yuanjing, the policy of selling official positions was abolished by Duke Wei and Prime Minister Wang working together. But in just those two years, the number of useless officials who infiltrated the system was appalling. Even to this day there are still many officials in high posts who are about as useful as a rock."

Xu Qi'an wasn't too concerned about Inspector Zhang's indignation. Rather, through the Inspector's words he caught onto some interesting points.

If it required the combined effort of Wei Yuan and Prime Minister Wang, who were archenemies, to suppress the policy, then who was the one selling the official positions?

There was no doubt about it — it was Emperor Yuanjing.

There were many emperors in history who sold official positions, and Emperor Yuanjing was not an exception. These emperors all had one thing in common: they spent money like water.

And the historical evaluation of such emperors was generally not favourable, with their actions often being criticized.

The Yuzhou Transport Office came into view, and seeing a large group approaching with a high-ranking official in a crimson robe and a Gold Gong carrying Nightwatcher, the runners rushed to report the matter, not even daring to question them.

A few minutes later, the Transport Commissioner of Yuzhou, a fourth-rank official, hurriedly came out to greet them personally.

This Transport Commissioner was over fifty, with greying hair, ordinary features, and a black mole between his eyebrows that added a distinctive touch to his otherwise plain appearance.

"I am Zhang Xingying, on an imperial mission to investigate a case in Yunzhou. Here is the official document from the Cabinet," Inspector Zhang said, producing a thin booklet and handing it over.

"Ah, Inspector. My deepest apologies, please come inside," after reading the document, the Transport Commissioner said respectfully, before gesturing to invite the party in.

The group entered the office, and the Transport Commissioner led Inspector Zhang to the main hall. After seating them and offering tea, he smiled and said, "Inspector, you've had a long journey. Are you planning to rest in Yuzhou for a few days?"

He discreetly observed this Inspector General from the capital, and all he could see was that this was a stern and uninteresting person. Since he met the man, the Inspector had not smiled once.

Are all officials from the capital so arrogant?

...This Transport Commissioner has no idea how serious the situation is. Inspector Zhang waved his hand, "Whether I stay here depends on the progress of the case."

"What do you mean by that?" the Transport Commissioner asked, puzzled.

Inspector Zhang looked outside the hall and called out loudly, "Bring them up!"

Along with the bearded man Fang He, sixty-two members of the Yellow Banner Gang were brought in, each bearing wounds of varying severity and looking very dispirited.

Seeing these people, the Transport Commissioner stood up in shock and confusion, pointing at them and looking at Inspector Zhang, "What's going on? Why are they wearing the uniforms of my Transport Office?"

"This is why we are here to visit you," Inspector Zhang replied.

He then detailed the entire situation to the Transport Commissioner, who turned pale and slumped back into his chair, muttering, "How could this be... how could this be..."

Tsk tsk, his composure is really poor. Compared to the officials I've dealt with in the capital, this Transport Commissioner is a complete novice... Xu Qi'an thought, while observing the Transport Commissioner's expressions and subtle movements.

Inspector Zhang spoke sternly, "Transport Commissioner, do you know about this case?"

The Transport Commissioner quickly shook his head, desperately trying to explain, "I truly have no knowledge of this, Inspector..."

Ignoring him, Inspector Zhang turned to the white-robed arcanists in the crowd, who nodded slightly, indicating he was telling the truth.

After a moment of contemplation, Inspector Zhang asked, "Is the Shipping Administrator in the office?"

Only then did the Transport Commissioner focus on the main culprit, furious that someone under his command had betrayed him. He said in a stern voice, "Shipping Administrator Yan Kai is off today and not in the office. I will immediately take the Inspector to apprehend him."

...

Outside the residence of Shipping Administrator Yan Kai, Inspector Zhang waved his hand, directing the Huben Guards to spread out and surround the mansion.

Yang Muhua, the Transport Commissioner who had accompanied them, also brought twenty constables.

Once the Huben Guards had spread out, Jiang Lyuzhong led his men to break down the door, subduing all the servants and guards in the mansion.

The combined forces of the Huben Guards, Transport Office constables, and Nightwatchers swept through the entire Yan residence with lightning speed, leaving no chance for resistance.

"Sir, he's in the study."

The Transport Office constables were the first to find Yan Kai. By the time Xu Qi'an and his colleagues arrived at the study, it was too late. He saw the floor covered in thick, freshly spilled blood.

Shipping Administrator Yan Kai lay lifeless in a large chair, his head tilted to one side, a deep gash in his neck, and a dagger on the floor to his right.

This outcome clearly caught Transport Commissioner Yang and Inspector Zhang off guard. Shock quickly gave way to anger that filled their chests.

However, their anger differed. Commissioner Yang's was more akin to impotent rage, knowing that with Yan Kai's death, suspicion would fall squarely on him first.

Inspector Zhang's fury was that of seeing a duck you'd just boiled up and fly away.

There's too many people, it could compromise the crime scene... and there was no guarantee the murderer wasn't among them, potentially tampering with crucial evidence... Xu Qi'an remained the calmest, quickly deciding:

"Everyone, leave the study and wait outside."

Inspector Zhang's spirits shook, as he scanned the room and commanded, "Everyone out, wait outside."

Soon, only Jiang Lyuzhong, Xu Qi'an, and the two officials remained in the study.

"Inspector, Yan Kai must have killed himself out of guilt. This case has nothing to do with me," Commissioner Yang piled on mountains of excuses, eager to distance himself from any suspicion.

Inspector Zhang ignored him, turning to Xu Qi'an, "Xu Ningyan, take a good look."

Commissioner Yang glanced at Xu Qi'an but quickly dismissed him, focusing on explaining and proclaiming his innocence to Inspector Zhang.

"The blood has coagulated into clumps, indicating he died not long ago, but just before we entered the mansion," Jiang Lyuzhong noted.

"Roughly around the time we entered the Transport Office," Xu Qi'an nodded.

He briefly examined Yan Kai's body. The wound was so obvious that a full autopsy wasn't necessary; he had died from a severed carotid artery.

After inspecting the body, Xu Qi'an meticulously searched every corner of the study for any potential clues.

The entire process took only five minutes. Xu Qi'an sighed, "Inspector, he was murdered, not a suicide."

Inspector Zhang nodded, "What makes you say that?"

The chatter from Commissioner Yang ceased as he turned to listen.

"If the carotid artery is severed, a person would struggle and flail due to lack of oxygen... driven only by survival instinct; they wouldn't remain seated like this. Of course, that's not enough to conclusively say he was murdered," Xu Qi'an explained.

"Yan Kai was left-handed, wasn't he?"

Transport Commissioner Yang was stunned. "How do you know?"

"His left middle finger has a thick callus, from years of holding a brush. Normally, calluses would be on the right middle finger, so I deduced he was left-handed.

"Now look at the wound on his neck—it's deeper on the left and shallower on the right. This indicates it was made by someone holding the knife in their right hand."

Amazing... The Transport Commissioner looked at Xu Qi'an in shock, no trace of contempt left in his eyes. It hadn't been half an incense stick's worth of time, and he had already found several clues, and deduced the true cause of death.

Impressive... This was the first time Inspector Zhang had witnessed Xu Qi'an's investigative abilities first-hand, though he had heard of them. No matter how the capital's official circles gossiped about this little Bronze Gong, hearing about it and seeing it were two different things.

But there's still no bloody use, no use in helping solve the case... the cause of Yan Kai's death was simple throat slitting; it's not as elaborate as a Warlock killing someone in their dream. But, exactly because this is such a simple and brusque method, it makes it much harder to identify the perpetrator... without any surveillance, solving this case would take far too much effort.

"The doors and windows show no signs of tampering or breaking. The killer and the victim were obviously acquainted. Interrogate the household staff to see if anyone visited recently or if they heard Yan Kai calling for help. Also, question everyone in the Transport Office, including the

Transport Commissioner, and search them to ensure they don't have artefacts that can conceal their qi, hindering the arcanists' detection," Xu Qi'an suggested.

Inspector Zhang said, "Commissioner, please cooperate with us."

For the couple hours, three arcanists from the Sitianjian continuously observed the officials and clerks of the Transport Office.

But they found nothing. With Shipping Administrator Yan Kai's death, the "insider theft" case's lead went cold.

Accompanied by Jiang Lyuzhong, Inspector Zhang went to the Yuzhou Criminal Investigation Bureau, the office responsible for judicial matters and also the imperial oversight body, under the Censorate.

Inspector Zhang, as an associate censor, was the superior of the Criminal Investigation Bureau.

In the golden evening light, Xu Qi'an sat on the rooftop of the Transport Office, bathed in the sunset, replaying the case in his mind.

With the death of the Shipping Administrator, the case's trail ended. Hah, this is also a clue, suggesting that the mastermind doesn't control the entire Transport Office.

This indicates it's not merely a simple case of embezzlement... The Minister of Industry has already fallen, yet Yuzhou's Transport Office continues its covert operations, smuggling iron ore to Yunzhou... This means someone is still manipulating events behind the scenes. This person doesn't have much power, able to control only the Shipping Administrator. Or perhaps they do, but must act covertly.

If I hadn't stumbled upon this by sheer luck, the iron ore smuggling might have continued indefinitely.

If there's smuggling of iron ore, could there also be smuggling of government salt and saltpetre? The court must thoroughly investigate the Transport Offices in all provinces.

This trip to Yunzhou might be more dangerous than I imagined, Xu Qi'an thought worriedly, when he suddenly heard someone calling him from below.

"Ningyan, come on, let's go to the Jiaofangsi for some fun," Song Tingfeng stood in the courtyard, waving to him.

"No. I'm thinking about serious matters," Xu Qi'an replied irritably.

"Come on, I heard the courtesans in Yuzhou are very good at serving people," Song Tingfeng coaxed.

"All you think about is the Jiaofangsi. Be careful, you might never get promoted," Xu Qi'an responded, exasperated.

...

The Jiaofangsi, Yuzhou.

Amid the melodious sound of strings and woodwind, Xu Qi'an raised his wine cup, laughing heartily, "Come on, let's drink! After drifting on the water for six days, I've got cobwebs down there!"

The Nightwatchers raised their cups in unison, each accompanied by a delicate beauty, drinking and laughing merrily.

As expected, Xu Ningyan ended up coming along. Song Tingfeng was not surprised by this; in fact, he had anticipated it. Back in the capital, Xu Qi'an never went to the Jiaofangsi of his own accord. It was always Song Tingfeng's idea, and then Xu Qi'an and Zhu Guangxiao would join him.

Sometimes, when Xu Ningyan was training, he would curse loudly, "Song Tingfeng, if you had even a shred of conscience, you'd stop interrupting my practice!"

But after cursing, he'd pat his butt and follow them anyway.

The Jiaofangsi in Yuzhou was different from the one in the capital. It wasn't as large, but it was built by the river, with six courtyards and two tall buildings, boasting an elegant landscape.

The rippling water distorted the reflections of the red lanterns, and the sound of string and woodwind floated through the courtyards, drifting across the shimmering river.

Given their status and rank, Xu Qi'an and his companions naturally wouldn't drink in the buildings with the mixed crowds of patrons. Led by officials from the Transport Office, they arrived at the courtyard of an orian named Hongxiu.

However, the courtesan named Hongxiu seemed somewhat reluctant. It had been nearly half an hour since the group started drinking in the courtyard, and she still hadn't made an appearance.

Chapter 187. Missed by a Hair

We urged her a myriad times until she appeared, with half her face hiding behind the Pipa still.

When Bai Juyi wrote this line, did he perhaps mean to subtly criticize the pipa player for being overly pretentious?

Xu Qi'an felt that the oiran named Hongxiu was rather pretentious, or perhaps she held herself in high regard. She arrived fashionably late to the tea gathering, and with a lukewarm smile, she raised her wine cup and said:

"Your servant wasn't feeling well and had to rest for a while. Please forgive me, milords."

She took a sip of wine as an apology, but didn't make any more of a performance.

Nonetheless, some made efforts to engage in games like drinking games. Since everyone present was a Bronze Gong, the games were simple and crude, involving fist guessing and dice rolling.

The smile is too professional... her back is too straight, her posture is stiff, indicating she isn't truly engaged... she's quite wary of physical contact with patrons. When I touched her hand earlier, there was disgust in her eyes...

In short: she looks down on martial artists.

Xu Qi'an enjoyed observing people's micro-expressions and subtle actions, as these details often reflected their inner thoughts.

This was a habit he developed from his previous profession.

Hongxiu's demeanor reminded Xu Qi'an of when he first met oiran Fuxiang. On that day, the renowned oiran of the capital's Jiaofangsi also maintained a superficially courteous but internally aloof attitude.

However, Fuxiang's professionalism was higher, and she didn't make it as obvious. Hongxiu, on the other hand, was a tad more blatant.

Of course, Fuxiang was from the Capital's Jiaofangsi — what kind of place was the capital? A place where the top of the top of society gathered, how could a place like Yuzhou compare?

Professionalism issues aside, Hongxiu was naturally very beautiful, possessing the delicate and tender qualities of a Jiangnan woman.

Her speech always carried soft, lingering tones, making her sound as if she were speaking to a lover, no matter who she was talking to.

"Allow your servant to play a piece for everyone," Hongxiu said with a gentle smile.

"Hongxiu's qin skills are renowned throughout Yuzhou's Jiaofangsi. If you come to our Yuzhou Jiaofangsi, you must listen to her play," an official from the Transport Office eagerly praised her.

It was as if he was introducing a local specialty to esteemed guests from afar, embellishing its merits as much as possible.

After she finished playing a piece, the official from the Transport Office cheerfully raised his cup, "Sirs, what do you think?"

Song Tingfeng, being a seasoned veteran, quickly raised his cup and responded, "She can certainly hold a candle to the oiran Fuxiang of the capital."

There's still a bit of a gap... Xu Qi'an wasn't being partial to his own favoured courtesan; he was simply making an objective assessment.

Fuxiang's qin skills were as exceptional as her other talents.

"Is she the oiran who inspired the lines *Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water; its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk*?" The Transport Office official's eyes lit up.

The distance between Yuzhou and the capital was great, but that poem had been out for quite some time, and letters exchanged among scholars had spread it to various regions.

Those lines were widely circulated, more so than "On the road ahead, surely will be friends dear and true; Throughout the land is there anyone who knows not you?"

"Indeed," Song Tingfeng replied.

"Rumour has it that Fuxiang is a stunning beauty, one of the finest in the world," the Transport Office official eagerly asked.

This is the power of reputation. Fuxiang was the most famous courtesan in the capital, bearing such a halo. To men who frequented the pleasure quarters, she was practically a goddess of the highest order.

Hongxiu's smile stiffened slightly, somewhat displeased.

Discussing a top courtesan from the same profession with such relish in her own courtyard made her feel disrespected.

Song Tingfeng, as if oblivious to Hongxiu's displeasure, laughed mischievously and pointed to Xu Qi'an, saying, "You should ask him."

Xu Qi'an responded indifferently, "She's alright. Among the beauties I've seen, she ranks in the top five."

As he spoke, beautiful face after beautiful face flashed through his mind: Auntie, Lingyue, Huaiqing, Lin'an, the National Teacher, Chu Caiwei...

Need he say any more?

The crowd couldn't help but glance at Xu Qi'an.

"You're quite the joker, milord, quite the joker," an official from the Transport Office laughed dryly.

"It's no joke," the usually taciturn Zhu Guangxiao spoke up to explain for his colleague. "Fuxiang is his lover."

... The official from the Transport Office almost couldn't keep his face from crinkling in, struggling to manage his expression to avoid bursting into laughter.

Fuxiang is his lover? The most famous courtesan in the capital falling for a rough warrior like you?

Why not claim the princess is your lover, or that the mysterious National Teacher is your lover?

However, bragging at a drinking party was standard practice. The official from the Transport Office, despite his disdain, maintained a cheerful facade.

Crude men... The disdain in the eyes of the oiran Hongxiu was no longer hidden, though she adeptly lowered her head to drink, keeping others from noticing.

She inherently disliked martial artists, who lacked tenderness and were rough in both speech and action, unlike scholars who were gentle and refined, composed poetry, and treated courtesans with courtesy.

"Who would have thought you had such a relationship with Fuxiang? May I know your esteemed name, my lord?" Hongxiu asked, half seriously and half mockingly.

The official from the Transport Office shot her a reproachful look and quickly raised his cup. "Let's drink, let's drink."

The topic was dropped, and Song Tingfeng laughed, "Ningyan, it's a good thing the boss didn't come to Yuzhou with us. He would never have agreed to our little outing to the Jiaofangsi."

Xu Qi'an replied, "This isn't pleasure-seeking; it's sightseeing. If the boss asks, that's what you tell him."

Ningyan... that must be his courtesy name. Hongxiu glanced at Xu Qi'an a few more times.

The tea gathering ended.

Hongxiu left early, and there was no more heard from her.

Not offering tea to a guest signified that she wasn't interested in the Nightwatchers present.

"She doesn't know what's good for her!" one of the Nightwatchers said angrily.

The official from the Transport Office felt embarrassed and quite irritated, not with the Nightwatchers but with Hongxiu.

However, the Jiaofangsi wasn't under the jurisdiction of the Transport Office. As one of the six courtesans of Yuzhou's Jiaofangsi, Hongxiu didn't need to concern herself with the Transport Office's opinions.

Song Tingfeng waved it off indifferently, "No matter, let's head to the next place?"

Xu Qi'an agreed with Song's approach. Forced enjoyment is never good, and forced love is never sweet.

The group left the courtyard, with Song Tingfeng and the others heading to the riverside. Under the cover of night, they stood on the bank to relieve their bladders.

Song Tingfeng: 8==D

Zhu Guangxiao: 8==D

Xu Qi'an: 8====D

...

Coals cracked in the warm bedroom. Hongxiu sipped on tea, relieving her of some drunkenness, and sat by the dressing table, letting the maid who had just entered massage her shoulders.

"Miss, they've left," the maid laughed softly. "To claim that Fuxiang, the most famous courtesan in the capital, is his lover, even I could tell it was just boasting."

Hongxiu curled her lips disdainfully. "Martial artists are always like that, crude and unbearable."

After a brief rest, another maid knocked on the door and said from outside, "Miss, Young Master Wei has booked the place with his classmates."

Upon hearing this, Hongxiu's face immediately brightened with joy. She cheerfully said, "Serve the young masters with wine and have them wait a moment."

She then hurriedly urged the maid, "Quickly help me change into that most beautiful gold-woven dress."

Young Master Wei was the nephew of Yuzhou's Prefect, a well-read scholar with a handsome appearance and an elegant demeanour.

After changing into a beautiful dress, putting on a jade hairpin and gold adornments, the elegantly dressed Hongxiu entered the drinking room, gracefully bowing, "Hongxiu greets the young masters."

She naturally sat beside the white-robed Young Master Wei. Young scholars passionately discussing the state of the nation and writing with fervour—this was the environment she enjoyed.

At such moments, she felt immense envy towards that unseen yet famous courtesan from the capital, Fuxiang.

How fortunate one must be to meet such a talented scholar and have poetry written about them, immortalizing their name.

"A few officials from the capital were here just now, they seemed to be Nightwatchers," Hongxiu chatted about it while pouring wine for Young Master Wei, laughing, "One of them even claimed that Fuxiang, the capital's top courtesan, is his lover."

The scholars present laughed heartily, "How amusing! How could Fuxiang fall for a crude martial artist?"

"Brother Wei, you visited the capital half a month ago. Did you get to witness the charm of Fuxiang?" someone asked.

"Shamefully, I only managed to see her once despite visiting three times," the white-robed Young Master Wei said with a look of infatuation. "Her name suits her—she truly is a beauty that could bring down a nation."

One of the young masters immediately asked, "Does Fuxiang have a lover?"

Young Master Wei seemed to recall something. "When I was there, I chatted with some of the guests. They mentioned that Fuxiang no longer receives guests, despite the constant stream of people hoping to catch a glimpse of her. However, there is one person who frequently visits the Reflecting Plum Pavilion — that's the name of her residence. It's said that this person is her lover."

The young masters were intrigued. "Is it the poet of 'its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.'?"

Young Master Wei sighed, "Who else could it be?"

After a pause, he looked around and said in a secretive tone, "This person's identity is quite special. This poem is widely known, yet the poet remains unknown, seldom talked about. Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

This piqued everyone's curiosity, and they began to speculate, "Is it because of a sensitive identity that cannot be revealed?"

Hongxiu's eyes sparkled as she listened. She was most curious about the identity of the poet who could transform the life of a courtesan.

After a while, Young Master Wei silenced the crowd by raising his hand. Shaking his head, he said, "Because this person is a Nightwatcher, not a scholar."

"What?!" The crowd was astonished and then suddenly understood.

No wonder the literary circles didn't publicize the poet's identity. It was mutually agreed to forget about it, because he was a Nightwatcher, not a scholar.

Nightwatcher... the speaker said it casually, but the listener took it to heart. Hongxiu's heart sank. She opened her mouth and asked in a trembling voice, "What is... his name?"

Young Master Wei glanced at the beauty beside him and replied, "Xu Qi'an, courtesy name Ningyan."

Crash... The wine cup slipped from her hand onto the table and then fell to the floor, shattering.

Everyone turned to look at Hongxiu, whose face had turned deathly pale and eyes were vacant, like a lifeless paper flower.

In her daze, Hongxiu suddenly collapsed onto the table, sobbing bitterly. Her tears flowed like rain through plum blossoms, a storm so violent that it made her body tremble.

Chapter 188. An Old Friend From Qingzhou?

Every person's destiny is different. Once an opportunity is missed, it's missed, and no amount of regret can bring it back.

Hongxiu, who had missed her chance to shine, was crying so hard she was gasping for breath. It would probably take her several days to realise this truth and a long time of self-adjustment to overcome her depression.

With Hongxiu crying like this, she had no choice but to leave the tea gathering. Young Master Wei and his friends, being well-mannered scholars, didn't complain or blame her. Instead, they comforted Hongxiu and advised her to rest well.

After sending Hongxiu off, Master Wei and his friends continued drinking. A place like the Jiaofangsi was meant for socialising and entertaining. Having beauties by their side was just a bonus; it didn't matter if they were absent. The men continued drinking and chatting as usual.

Just then, didn't someone say that Nightwatchers were here for a tea gathering? Young Master Wei suddenly thought of this detail and asked the maid serving them wine, "Did Hongxiu say that one of them claimed Fuxiang was his lover?"

"I think so," the maid replied.

A vague thought started forming in Master Wei's mind. He stopped drinking, looking seriously at the maid, and said, "Then... what was the name of the Bronze Gong?"

"Sir, I don't know," the maid shook her head, thinking to herself that she hadn't paid attention to such details.

The other young men were all smart, and recalling Hongxiu's unusual behaviour earlier, they were startled. "Could it be that Xu Ningyan has come to Yuzhou?"

The case of the Shipping Administrator had just happened today and hadn't spread in Yuzhou yet. Among these scholars, only Young Master Wei had connections in officialdom, but even he would need a day or two to learn of such things.

"We can visit the station^[^1] tomorrow. If that Nightwatcher is staying there, we must pay him a visit."

...

At the station!

The carriage slowed and stopped outside the station. Inspector Zhang got out of the carriage with a stern expression and returned to the station with Jiang Lyuzhong. It was already late at night with a full moon hanging in the sky.

Inspector Zhang glanced at the stable in the distance, where only a few horses were tethered. Entering the station, he asked the staff and learned that most of the Nightwatchers were out partying and hadn't returned.

Already in a heavy mood, Inspector Zhang angrily said, "Preposterous! We are on an imperial mission. How can they be so negligent and indulge in pleasure?"

Jiang Lyuzhong laughed, "They've been cooped up on the boat for so many days. It's natural to want to relax. As long as the Inspector is fine and healthy, it doesn't matter what they do otherwise."

The two of them went upstairs, and in the dark hallway, they encountered a guy in his underwear, shivering in the cold.

Jiang Lyuzhong, who had night vision, stared at the person in confusion, "What the hell are you up to?"

"I just took a cold bath."

It was Xu Qi'an, who hadn't stayed at the Jiaofangsi for the night.

"So?"

"This is the south." He said nonsensically and then sighed, "Just trying to recapture an old feeling... Gold Gong Jiang, Inspector Zhang, you're back. The others stayed at the Jiaofangsi."

Inspector Zhang nodded and went into his room without a word.

"Why didn't you stay at the Jiaofangsi?" Jiang Lyuzhong scrutinised Xu Qi'an, knowing him to be a seasoned frequenter of such places.

"An eel, though not a proper eel, has its principles. Any transaction involving money is vulgar and sinful. This eel firmly opposes such behavior." Xu Qi'an said with a serious face and walked away.

Jiang Lyuzhong watched his retreating back, thinking that the guy must be drunk. Spouting all sorts of nonsense — and furthermore, a martial artist at Refining Vitality should already be immune to all sorts of cold and heat, yet he was still shivering.

Xu Qi'an entered his room, shut the door, and quickly jumped into bed, wrapping himself in the blanket, pretending to live in the cold and damp south.

Geographically speaking, although Yuzhou was not coastal, it was in the south. Unlike the bone-chilling cold of the capital, Yuzhou's cold seeped through all the pores in one's skin.

This reminded Xu Qi'an of living in the south in his past life, taking baths in winter, turning off the hot water to soap up while shivering.

After bathing, dressing would make his nose run.

Unfortunately, as a Refining Qi martial artist, his body was too robust to feel cold easily. Even soaking in ice water would only feel cool.

Wrapped in his blanket, Xu Qi'an comfortably drifted into sleep.

...

Candlelight flickered, small as a pea, swaying with a dusky glow.

Inspector Zhang sat at his desk, picked up a brush, and began writing a memorial:

As your servant passed through Yuzhou, he inadvertently uncovered a case of corruption. Yan Kai, the Shipping Administrator of the Yuzhou Transport Office, colluded with the local Yellow Flag Gang to assassinate a iron ore transport's crew, and embezzle its cargo to Yunzhou...

Upon examining the Yuzhou Transport Office's records of sunken ships, your servant discovered that within the past ten years, there have been forty-three cases in total, two million catties of iron ore were lost. The enormity of this number is appalling. Under complete secrecy, these traitors have drained the resources of the crown, extracting the essence and marrow of the nation — it makes one shudder in fear.

If merely the one province of Yuzhou can lose two million catties of iron within a decade, what staggering amount may be lost with all sixteen provinces of the Great Feng combined? Your servant urges Your Majesty to thoroughly investigate all incidents of sunken ships in the Transport Administrations of all provinces.

The former Minister of Industry colluded with the Church of the Warlock God, covertly supporting the banditry in Yuzhou, possibly with the intent of rebellion.

This aside, the Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an is astute beyond men, his skills are exceptional, and he is a pillar of the nation. In this embezzlement case, he should be given primary merit.

This journey to Yunzhou is fraught with danger. Your humble servant pledges to exert my utmost efforts, until the day I die.

...

The next day at dusk, the group left Yuzhou, continuing their journey by boat to Yunzhou.

During the day, Xu Qi'an, along with the Huben Guards and his Nightwatcher colleagues, bought some seasonal vegetables, wine, rice, and other supplies in the city, all charged to the Shipping Office's account, essentially obtaining them for free.

That night, the ship's cook prepared a sumptuous feast for the imperial envoy's team. After a satisfying meal, Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged in his room, practicing his breathing exercises.

"Ningyan, it's such a pity you didn't sleep with the Oiran of the Yuzhou Jiaofangsi last night," Song Tingfeng said, feeling sorry for his colleague for passing up such a great opportunity.

"Heh, that Hongxiu despises us coarse martial men," Xu Qi'an replied.

"That's because you didn't reveal your true identity. If you had told her you were the great scholar who wrote '*its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk,*' she would've been eager to offer herself to you," Song Tingfeng countered.

Xu Qi'an was puzzled, "If that's the case, why didn't you speak up for me?"

Song Tingfeng sneered, "Bullshit, if I wasn't jealous of you. Why would I help you get famous and then watch you sleep with the Oiran?"

"Aren't you having fun every day too?"

"How's that the same?"

"Turn off the lights, and they're all the same."

"It's blow out, not turn off," Song Tingfeng corrected.

Oil lamps are meant to be blown out, so what does turning off mean?

Zhu Guangxiao, who was also practicing his breathing exercises, paused and opened his eyes, saying, "Besides the Oiran from Jiaofangsi, I noticed that Head Constable Lyu from the capital prefecture constabular seems to have a liking for Ningyan."

Song Tingfeng became even more sour, "How do you manage it? Your skills in attracting proper women are incredible. Teach me a few tricks, brother."

"Brother?"

"Teach your little brother a few tricks."

"You'll have to call me dad."

"Get lost!" Song Tingfeng flatly refused. He had been tricked by Xu Ningyan in a similar way once before.

"Will you call me or not?"

"Dad."

==line break==

Xu Qi'an laughed, "Ladies are like sand; if you grip them too tightly, they'll slip through your fingers. You need to get them wet, then not only can you hold on to 'em, you can mould them into any shape you want."

"What do you mean?" Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao didn't understand.

"You need to connect with their hearts, not just their bodies," Xu Qi'an explained.

"Sounds reasonable, but are you really qualified to say that?" Song Tingfeng retorted, suddenly angry. "You tricked me into calling you dad again. Take it back, or I'll kill you."

As he spoke, he lunged at Xu Qi'an, preparing to wrestle him down.

At that moment, the three of them heard cries for help from outside.

"Something's wrong..." Xu Qi'an kicked Song Tingfeng away, didn't bother putting on his boots, and dashed out of the room.

His two colleagues followed closely behind.

Almost simultaneously, the Silver Gongs, who had higher cultivation, also rushed out, followed by the Bronze Gongs.

At night, the boat was anchored in a calm section of the river. On the pitch-black water, a Huben Guard was floundering, sometimes sinking and then struggling back to the surface.

He appeared to be a capable swimmer, but something underwater seemed to be pulling him down with all its might.

"Hmph!"

From inside the cabin, a cold snort came from Jiang Lyuzhong.

The struggling Huben Guard suddenly seemed freed from his restraint and floated to the surface without being dragged down again.

The Nightwatchers on the deck threw down a rope and pulled him up.

By this time, more Huben Guards had rushed up from below deck, fully armed and tense.

"It's nothing, just someone falling into the water." Xu Qi'an turned to reassure them, then scrutinised the drenched man and noticed a bruised handprint on his ankle.

"What happened?" asked a Silver Gong, who was one of Jiang Lyuzhong's subordinates.

This mission was led by Gold Gong Jiang Lyuzhong, and apart from Xu Qi'an, who was sent by Wei Yuan for training, the other Nightwatchers were all under Jiang Lyuzhong's command.

As for Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, Xu Qi'an had brought them along because the travel stipend was too tempting, and there was also an opportunity for meritorious service.

The Huben Guard, who had fallen into the water, spat out a few mouthfuls of water and quickly recovered, though his face remained pale, likely from the fright.

"Your subordinate had too much to drink and went up to relieve myself... Suddenly, I heard someone in the water calling me. When I looked down, I saw my deceased mother.

"I don't know what came over me, but I remembered all the moments she raised me and was overcome with grief, so I jumped in.

"Once in the water, I sobered up and realised that even if my mother had turned into a ghost, she wouldn't be here. But something grabbed my foot and tried to drag me underwater..."

"It's a water ghost," an experienced sailor said fearfully. "The spirit of a drowned person, often luring others to their deaths. Many people drown in this canal every year, and the accumulated yin energy can easily give rise to water ghosts.

"Sirs, it's best not to go out at night. Water ghosts never come ashore. As long as you stay off the deck, you'll be fine. When we set sail, everything at night must be done below decks. It's a part of the trade."

Everyone couldn't help but turn and look at the pitch-black water. Encountering such a thing at night was indeed creepy.

After this incident, the Huben Guards no longer went out at night to relieve themselves, while the Nightwatchers continued as usual.

As for Xu Qi'an, he deliberately went to the deck every night, but he never encountered the legendary water ghost.

It wasn't because Xu Qi'an was fearless or wanted the water ghosts to take a break; he was just curious to see what water monkeys looked like. He had grown up hearing ghost stories about water monkeys.

Finally, the imperial envoy's team reached the Qingzhou dock.

After arriving in Qingzhou, they had to switch to traveling by land, which required carriages and horses that the team didn't have. They needed the help of the Qingzhou government to arrange these.

As they disembarked, Inspector Zhang walked up to Xu Qi'an with a smile and said, "The Commissioner of Qingzhou is a great scholar from the Yunlu Academy, Yang Gong, also known as Yang Ziqian."

Xu Qi'an didn't immediately process what he had said, so Inspector Zhang added, "He is also known as Ziyang Jushi."

Chapter 189. This Little Sir Is...

It's him... Xu Qi'an suddenly understood, remembering the great scholar who had shamelessly taken credit for his farewell poem.

He didn't know who Yang Gong was, but the name Ziyang Jushi was famous. This guy had seized the opportunity when Xu Xinnian recited his poem and had forcibly given it a title, without an ounce of shame or embarrassment.

Inspired by Ziyang Jushi, Xu Qi'an later used poems to twirl the great scholars from the academy on his pinkie finger, and felt no guilt about it.

In the Jianghu, if you're not freeloading, I'm freeloading.

They hired a carriage near the dock. After getting in, Inspector Zhang continued, "Ziyang Jushi was the top scorer in the imperial exams in the 14th year of Yuanjing. The following year, he retired and has since been teaching at the academy, nurturing countless students."

Xu Qi'an was intrigued. "Retired the following year?"

As the top scorer, he could have entered the Hanlin Academy, where scholars are considered ministers-in-waiting. To put it another way, a top scoring *zhuangyuan* would have a good chance of being prime minister.

Retiring just a year in? What a loss!

"It was due to the political struggles at court. Although the factions fight fiercely, they unite against scholars from Yunlu Academy," Inspector Zhang sighed.

"After becoming the top scorer, Ziyang Jushi was sent to a remote post and ignored. This disheartened him, and he spent a year frequenting the Jiaofangsi. He resigned the following year and returned to the Cloud Deer Academy to teach."

...I heard about this. He enjoyed freeloading for an entire year. Xu Qi'an sincerely envied him.

Apart from a long sigh, Inspector Zhang didn't elaborate on the political dynamics with Ziyang and the Cloud Deer Academy at court.

With a younger brother in the Academy, Xu Qi'an would already be very clear with that.

The succession crisis two hundred years ago made the royal family wary and disdainful of Cloud Deer Academy scholars. Consequently, the lesser sage Cheng established the Imperial College to replace Cloud Deer Academy in supplying talent to the court.

Both sides had conflicts of interest and ideological disputes. If not for Emperor Yuanjing's obsession with balancing powers, Ziyang Jushi might still be teaching at the academy.

"Ziyang Jushi's talent and tactics are top-notch. When he first arrived in Qingzhou, he swiftly cleaned up the local government, dismissing and imprisoning 178 corrupt officials within a month, shaking the entire Qingzhou officialdom," Inspector Zhang said with admiration.

So reckless? Although it's common for a new official to make bold moves, even if a high-ranking official from the capital wanted to clean up Qingzhou, it should be done gradually... How long has Ziyang Jushi been in office?

Xu Qi'an was puzzled and asked, "Did the court factions allow such drastic actions?"

Inspector Zhang smiled, "During the evaluation period, the court factions were too busy fighting each other to collaborate. Plus, Duke Wei was holding them in check..."

He gave Xu Qi'an a knowing look and continued, "Moreover, Ziyang Jushi's actions, though drastic, were thorough. He gathered sufficient evidence and made the criminals confess... Cloud Deer Academy scholars are most adept at reasoning, aren't they?"

Sir, you're "reasoning" is physical evidence, isn't it?

Xu Qi'an understood and exchanged a knowing smile with Inspector Zhang.

After arriving at the official station in Qingzhou, Inspector Zhang specifically brought Xu Qi'an along to visit Ziyang Jushi at the government office.

Xu Qi'an now understood why Inspector Zhang had initiated the conversation. This experienced inspector general feared that Ziyang Jushi might not cooperate, so he brought Xu Qi'an along.

After all, this inspector was inspecting Yunzhou, not Qingzhou.

With Xu Qi'an present, Ziyang Jushi would surely give face and comply with any requests.

At the Government office, a clerk led them to the inner hall where they were served tea.

"The Commissioner is inspecting the warning stele at the various offices."

They were received by the Left Vice Commissioner, a fourth-rank official.

Inspector Zhang pondered, "Is it the stone stele in the front courtyard?"

The Left Vice Commissioner smiled and nodded, "The Commissioner intends to erect a warning stele to admonish Qingzhou officials to be honest and serve the people."

Inspector Zhang nodded, this was an expected outcome of the anti-corruption campaign: "A lot of hard work must have went into this, but why is the stele blank?"

The Left Vice Commissioner sighed, "The Commissioner hasn't decided what to inscribe yet and has been troubled by it. He's asked us to brainstorm and provide inspiration, causing us all quite a headache."

Ziyang Jushi is quite talented, knowing how to organise a writing competition...

Xu Qi'an mused.

The Commissioner, responsible for administrative affairs, was akin to a high-ranking official in Xu Qi'an's previous life.

The Great Feng Kingdom was divided into sixteen provinces, which Xu Qi'an understood as comparable to provinces in his previous world, though not all regions were equivalent. Some

provinces were composed of smaller regions, each with their own administrative divisions like prefectures and counties.

For example, Qingzhou province controlled over a dozen prefecture-level provinces, as well as many cities and county level divisions.

...

At this moment, the Commissioner Yang Gong, leading a group of Qingzhou officials into the Prefecture Office. The Prefect of the Prefecture accompanied him respectfully.

Dressed in a scarlet robe, Yang Gong stood in front of the stone stele and nodded in satisfaction, "Gentlemen, do you have any suggestions for the inscription on the stele?"

In just a few months, the scholarly aura of a teacher had gradually faded from Yang Gong, replaced by the authority of a governing official.

"The official believes that we should inscribe the Commissioner's deeds of purging corrupt officials and upholding justice to serve as a warning to future generations," the Qingzhou Prefect suggested, bowing.

Yang Gong was somewhat tempted. Such an inscription would certainly be recorded in Qingzhou's local chronicles and praised by future generations.

But he quickly dismissed this idea, "The inscription should not be overly long; otherwise, it becomes too complex and loses its impact."

"Then let's inscribe a poem," an official suggested instinctively.

He immediately noticed that everyone present was looking at him calmly...

The official forced a few laughs and fell silent.

For scholars well-versed in literature, writing poems was not difficult. Most had a few compositions from their youth, but whether they were worthy of being inscribed on a stele was another matter.

For a poem to be inscribed on a stele, it not only had to be well-written but also serve as a moral warning. Such poems were not easy to write on the spot.

As they were discussing, a clerk from the Office arrived on horseback, quickly entering and standing a short distance away. He cupped his hands and said, "Commissioner, an Inspector General from the capital has arrived at the Administration Office."

An Inspector General? Why is this year's Inspector General here so soon? The Geng-zi year is the year for the official audit, and by convention, the Inspector General should arrive after the results from the audit are out, indicating the outcomes of factional struggles at court.

Yang Gong, who had received a letter about this a few days earlier, explained, "He's not here for Qingzhou; he's passing through on his way to Yunzhou."

Yunzhou... The officials all had expressions of understanding.

Yang Gong looked at the clerk and said, "Inform the Inspector General that I am busy with important matters and will not be able to see him. If he needs anything, he can speak to the Vice Commissioners."

Being a great scholar from the Cloud Deer Academy, Yang Gong had little in common with the officials in the capital and no particular ties with them. He was too preoccupied with the stele inscription to bother with an Inspector he didn't know well.

"Yes!" The clerk responded and then added, "The Inspector General also asked me to relay a message: Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an is accompanying him."

Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an? Who is that? The officials were momentarily puzzled, but Yang Gong understood immediately. He had been keeping track of events in the capital and maintained correspondence with the great scholars of the Cloud Deer Academy.

"Prepare the palanquin and return to the Office immediately." Yang Gong's attitude changed drastically, his tone urgent and excited: "Quick, get it ready."

With that, he left the officials behind and hurried out of the Prefecture Office.

Uh... The officials of Qingzhou looked at each other in confusion, staring at Yang Gong's departing figure.

"Who is this Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an? The name sounds somewhat familiar," the Qingzhou Prefect said, frowning.

"Why not go and welcome the Inspector from the capital?"

"Good idea, let's go."

The officials left the Prefecture Office in a procession of sedan chairs, heading towards the Administration Office.

...

Xu Qi'an didn't have to wait long at the Office before a high-ranking official in a scarlet robe arrived. This man had an old-fashioned face, a goatee popular among middle-aged men, bright eyes, and a commanding presence.

He was an imposing figure.

On his chest was an embroidered golden pheasant, indicating a second-rank official. The position of Administration Commissioner was likely second-rank.

Xu Qi'an recognised the rank but not the person. He guessed that this imposing man in the scarlet robe must be the Qingzhou Administration Commissioner, the great scholar from Cloud Deer Academy, Ziyang Jushi, who had once taken credit for his farewell poem.

After exchanging bows with Inspector Zhang, Ziyang Jushi turned his gaze towards Xu Qi'an, who was wearing a dark uniform and had a Bronze Gong tied to his chest, silently appraising him.

At this moment, he appeared less excited, maintaining a demeanor that was both gentle and authoritative.

...Only one Bronze Gong, he must be Xu Xinnian's cousin... Judging by appearances alone, there was no resemblance between the brothers... Compared to Xinnian, there is quite a difference... Yang Gong smiled and said:

"So, you are Xu Ningyan?"

Xu Qi'an quickly cupped his hands, "Yes, sir."

"There's no need to be so formal with me. You can regard yourself as a student," Yang Gong's smile broadened. "Indeed, you are quite talented, no less than Xinnian."

Ziyang Jushi has quite an eye for talent... Xu Qi'an thought happily, "Your praise is too generous, sir."

After some polite exchanges, Yang Gong inquired about the current situation in the capital, though he had already learned quite a bit through letters from the academy.

Bringing Xu Ningyan along was indeed the right decision. Otherwise, the Commissioner wouldn't have shown such an attitude... Inspector Zhang sighed and said, "The capital is in turmoil, with factional strife still intense..."

He then narrated events from the Sangpo case to the Yunzhou case involving the Minister of Industry.

Ziyang Jushi listened with a cold smile, but he refrained from commenting too much on the court's situation since Inspector Zhang was not an ally. If only Xu Qi'an were here, he would have spoken more freely.

In the evening, Ziyang Jushi hosted a banquet in a charming courtyard for Inspector Zhang, with Jiang Lyuzhong also invited, along with the Qingzhou Prefect and other high-ranking officials.

The courtyard was brightly lit, with drapes hanging low, and the officials sat at tables, enjoying their drinks and company.

A band and dancers from Jiaofangsi performed in the chilly courtyard to entertain the officials.

Initially, Jiaofangsi was purely an entertainment department, performing songs and dances at official banquets. Over time, it evolved into a state-run brothel.

The young women went from performing arts to selling their bodies, forced into this business.

The central figures at the banquet were Commissioner Yang Gong and Inspector Zhang Xingying. As for Jiang Lyuzhong, although he was highly skilled as a Gold Gong, Nightwatchers and civil officials were natural adversaries, so few paid him much attention.

Xu Qi'an thought he would be treated similarly and enjoyed the idea of being free from social obligations.

Unexpectedly, an official in a scarlet robe embroidered with cloud geese raised his glass towards Xu Qi'an and tentatively asked, "Is this young sir the poet of '*Delicate, tilting branches reflected on clear and shallow water; its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.*'?"