

Nightwatcher 191

Chapter 191. Xu Qi'an's Seven Letters

In the night, the cold wind blew, making the entire pond of red lotuses sway, resembling a surging sea of fire, beautiful to the extreme.

Xu Qi'an silently took a deep breath, inhaling the fragrant scent.

"Yunzhou is mountainous, but unlike the jungles of the Southern Marches, it is not covered in dense forests and miasma. The mountains are rich in medicinal herbs and other resources," Ziyang Jushi continued, gazing at the pool of red lotuses:

"Yunzhou also has fertile farmland and ample water resources. Although its annual rice production doesn't match that of Yuzhou^[^1] and Zhangzhou, the breadbaskets of the Great Feng, Yunzhou's annual rice yield is more than enough to feed two provinces."

...It sounds like Yunzhou terrain should be rolling hills. Xu Qi'an nodded in realisation.

Among the basic landforms, rolling hills are the most fertile and resource-rich. In my previous life, the so-called land of fish and rice was in the Jiangnan hills.

Yuzhou and Zhangzhou, the breadbaskets of Great Feng, were grasslands, whilst the Southern Marches were mountainous, with high mountains everywhere and very few fertile fields.

Ziyang Jushi continued in a serious tone: "Yunzhou has another geographical advantage; it borders the Southern Sea, so there's no need to worry about being attacked from both front and back. If worse comes to worst, one can always set sail.

"The conflicts between the Church of the Warlock God and the Great Feng are becoming more frequent at the border. If they want to create internal chaos and distract Great Feng, choosing Yunzhou is a wise move."

Hearing this, why do I feel like this trip to Yunzhou is going to be a journey of total annihilation? Psh psh, children's words, children's words...

"Don't worry," Ziyang Jushi seemed to see through Xu Qi'an's concern and smiled. "Although the Great Feng has serious problems, it is generally still stable, and the authority of the court remains intact.

"Even if the Church of the Warlock God is scheming in Yunzhou, they will only act in secret and never openly. In this time in my office at Qingzhou, I have had the spare time to train some messenger eagles. I'll give you one later. If anything unexpected happens in Yunzhou, you can use the eagle to send a message. It's faster than using the postal route."

But even then, it would still take several days to get a response... Indeed, a world without mobile phones feels so insecure. It would be great if everyone had a fragment of the Earth Book. Xu Qi'an gratefully replied, "Thank you for your kindness, Teacher."

After a pause, he asked, "What should I do once I get to Yunzhou?"

"Just focus on investigating the case and protecting Zhang Xinying. As for the social interactions in the officialdom, you don't need to worry about them," Ziyang Jushi said with a smile. "Since Wei Yuan appointed Zhang Xinying as the Inspector General, he must be someone exceptional."

Xu Qi'an nodded.

Having finished discussing official matters, Ziyang Jushi pondered for a moment before saying, "I often exchange letters with Jinyan, and he frequently mentions you in his letters. You can be considered half a student of Yunlu Academy... I heard that a few months ago, the academy was filled with a surge of clear energy?"

Who is Jinyan? Oh, it's Second Brother's teacher, Great Scholar Zhang Shen... It took Xu Qi'an a few seconds to realise who "Jinyan" was, as he wasn't used to addressing people by their courtesy names.

What does Ziyang Jushi mean by this... Didn't Yunlu Academy tell him the truth? Or is he hinting that he knows it was me but just didn't say it outright? Maybe it's because the letters can't ensure secrecy, so the great scholars of Yunlu Academy mentioned it but didn't reveal the truth?

He cautiously replied, "It seems that the academy has classified this matter as top secret. The Lesser Sage Temple remains sealed, and no one is allowed to enter."

At this point, Xu Qi'an couldn't help but think of the Lesser Sage, the one who made a deer out to be a horse. He was truly a great man because he always stood behind his wife.

Ziyang Jushi nodded slightly and didn't ask further.

Xu Qi'an, however, had some questions he wanted to ask this grand scholar. After thinking for a while, he decided to ask the first question:

"Teacher, due to the Sangpo case some time ago, I challenged myself to study at night and read historical books. I discovered that before our academy's Prime Minister suppressed Buddhism, he shouted the slogan 'If buddha does not die, then all will be buddha.'

"Subsequently, that Prime Minister advanced to the Realm of Mandate Seeker. I wonder, even if Buddhism has its flaws, it is still a respected tradition. Isn't 'If buddha does not die, then all will be buddha' too extreme?"

Xu Qi'an didn't know how the Buddhism in this world compared to that of his previous life. In this world, there was no one Siddhartha Gautama, rather the Buddha was a title, the one who stood at the top of the Buddhist house.

But regardless, Buddhism shouldn't be considered a cult.

"This matter involves a great secret, which even I do not know," Ziyang Jushi replied.

How can you say it involves a secret if you don't know? Xu Qi'an forcibly held back his retort.

Ziyang Jushi chuckled, "The Dean knows."

Xu Qi'an's second question was about why there was a Confucian sage's statue in the Abyss of the Southern Marches, but he decided not to ask.

As someone stationed in the capital, Xu Qi'an shouldn't know about the statue at the bottom of the Abyss. Even using the phrase "I have a friend" wouldn't work.

Not even the Nightwatchers Constabulary could possibly know about this matter.

...

Returning to the station, Xu Qi'an took a cold bath and then sat cross-legged in his room, practicing his breathing exercises and visualisation.

Qingzhou bordered Yunzhou. From here, with fast horses, it would take three to five days to reach Yunzhou. Even considering that Inspector Zhang's health was frail, they would still be able to reach the Qingzhou border within a week.

I can use this time to try and break through to the Refining Spirit stage. Not sleeping for ten days is no big deal; back when I was just an ordinary person, I managed to stay up for 72 hours straight in an internet café...

The next day, Commissioner Yang Gong gathered stonemasons to inscribe the warning poem for officials on the stele in the front yards of various government offices in Qingzhou.

From the Qingzhou Prefect to the ordinary clerks, everyone could see these four lines of the poem every day as they entered and exited the government offices.

"What does it say?"

"*Your food and your money,*

flesh and blood of the people.

The people are easy to abuse,

the heavens are hard to cheat."

"What a great poem. I haven't read much, but I can say this: fuckin' hell, it's written well. It must have been written by our honorable Governor."

"It wasn't written by the Governor. It was written by someone named Xu Qi'an. Oh, there's a small note next to it: 'Mentor Yang Gong.' Ah, so it's our Governor's student."

This poem was indeed written by Xu Qi'an, but Ziyang Jushi added a clever touch by having the words "Mentor Yang Gong" inscribed next to Xu Qi'an's name.

If the three grand scholars from Yunlu Academy were present, they would be outraged and exclaim: "Shameless old fox, taking credit like this?"

Many upright officials were highly impressed by this poem, silently remembering the name Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an's name quickly spread through the officialdom of Qingzhou. Many scholars and officials soon discovered that the person who composed these poems, hailed as the brightest light in Great Feng's literary world in the past two hundred years, was indeed Xu Qi'an.

What left people most astounded was that he wasn't a scholar, but a Nightwatcher.

Regardless, both the officials and scholars in Qingzhou admired Xu Qi'an's talent and the spirit expressed in his poems.

The women of the Jiaofangsi, upon hearing this news, were filled with excitement and fervor. Each of them fervently wished that the great poet Xu Qi'an would visit them and leave behind a couple of his verses.

They were willing to do anything for this chance.

...

Outside Qingzhou City.

Ziyang Jushi, accompanied by a group of high-ranking officials from Qingzhou, personally escorted the Inspector's team out of the city.

"Parting here, who knows when we will meet again. Take care, Teacher." Xu Qi'an saluted as a disciple.

Ziyang Jushi nodded slightly, feeling somewhat wistful. He had just accepted a new student, and now he was leaving before he could even warm up to him.

"On this trip to Yunzhou, handle the case well. Always remember to serve the court and the people of the realm," Yang Gong said solemnly.

Serve the people of the realm... Xu Qi'an silently repeated these words in his heart.

...

Several days later, at the Qingzhou border, at an inn.

At 2 a.m., after finishing his breathing exercises and visualisation, Xu Qi'an, who hadn't slept for seven days, walked out of his room holding a candle.

It was late at night, and the inn was quiet. He walked along the corridor to the end and then went downstairs.

By the counter in the lobby, an oil lamp burned quietly, and the inn servant was sleeping soundly at the desk, a bit of drool glistening at the corner of his mouth.

Government-run inns and stations operate 24 hours a day, because some officials travel overnight due to urgent business and may need lodging at any time.

Knock, knock...

Xu Qi'an gently tapped the counter, making a dull sound.

The inn servant woke up, wiped his mouth, and got up, "Sir, what can I do for you?"

"Give me some envelopes and letter paper. This official needs to write some letters," Xu Qi'an requested.

The inn servant immediately took out a sheet of letter paper and an envelope from the cabinet. Xu Qi'an shook his head, "Not enough."

"How many do you need?"

"Seven envelopes, and as much letter paper as possible."

It was the first time the inn servant had seen someone write seven letters in one go. Mumbling to himself, he obediently handed over seven envelopes and letter paper.

Taking the envelopes and paper, Xu Qi'an turned and went upstairs, back to his room.

He laid the envelopes on the desk, took out red lotus petals from a small jade mirror, and pressed five petals on five envelopes. Then he spread out the paper, placed the paperweight on it, and began to grind ink to write letters.

The first letter:

Princess Huaiqing

As I write this letter, I have arrived at the border of Qingzhou, and am about to enter Yunzhou province. When leaving the capital, I originally wanted to discuss this matter with you, and hear your wise words.

However, your subordinate did not realise that he has offended Your Highness, and made you shut him out with such cold heart.

Passing through Yuzhou, your subordinate discovered a case of embezzlement... from this case, we discovered that the corruption the Warlocks have made in the court is deep-seated, and they have trained many spies and insiders. It is said that a dam of a thousand li can fall from mere ant-holes — this must not be taken lightly. I hope Your Highness can talk to His Majesty, to strive to make the nation more prosperous, and revitalise the power of the court.

Another thing, there is a flower in Qingzhou called a red lotus, that opens in the dead of winter. The flower's aura: it comes from the earth yet is not dirtied by it, it sparkles in the water yet does not try to enchant, it is full and straight without tangled branching, its fragrance spreads far and lingers in the air. It is to be admired from afar, and not to be disrespected.

Your subordinate picked a lotus petal for you, and enclose it within this letter, to express my kind regards.

The second letter:

Princess Lin'an.

The night is long, and I've no heart to sleep, Your Highness's smile seems to appear before me, and your laughter echoes in my ears. It has been over a fortnight, and I miss you dearly.

The road to Yunzhou was not lonely; on the way I saw many strange and wondrous sights. I discovered that in the waterways were water spirits — one night a guard stepped onto the deck, and suddenly heard his late mother calling him. He jumped into the canal, as if possessed.

The water ghost clutched tightly at his foot, trying to drag him to the canal floor. Thankfully, your subordinate noticed something was awry, and undaunted by the dangers I jumped into the river, exchanging over three hundred blows with the ghost, until the river frothed and foamed so greatly, before I could save the poor soldier.

On the way from Qingzhou to Yunzhou, we passed by a village. A strange thing happened in the village — one villager's late wife suddenly arose from the dead, walking day and night around the room. She grew long and frightening white teeth, her nails grew sharp and black, and as soon as she saw someone, she would bite.

Thankfully, your subordinate was there to see it, and immediately saw there was a reason for her body's undeath. After a thorough investigation, I found the truth — in reality the husband had had an affair with the widow of the past village chief, and wanted to divorce and remarry. His wife wasn't willing, and so he brutally murdered her.

His wife died with resentment still in her, and so her soul didn't dissipate, hence her body "arose from the dead".

One more thing, there is a flower in Qingzhou called the red lotus — it is enchanting like fire, and always makes your subordinate think of Your Highness's fiery red dress, and your unmatched beauty.

~~It is almost a spitting image of Your Highness's bitch qi~~ (Struck out) *It is graceful like the spring wind, and tall and upright like an arrow, yet when the wind blows over, it shyly lowers its head. Suddenly a phrase comes to mind: That softness with which she lowers her head, is like a lotus's modesty even in the cold winter wind.*

Your Subordinate spoke too rashly, and accidentally offended Your Highness. It's just that Your Highness is too beautiful, I have not seen any better.

The third letter.

Miss Caiwei:

A day apart is like three autumns, and totalling everything up, we've not seen each other for over half a month. How is the progress with the chicken bouillon? Are you able to progress into a Master of Alchemy?

There's a delicacy in Yuzhou called napa steamed ham — ham is a food unique to the south; it is difficult to find in the north.

And it's easy to make, too: take a cured leg of ham and cut off the skin, keeping only the lean meat. Then, use chicken stock to simmer the skin until it is tender, then the meat, then add the centres of napa cabbage, cut with two inches of the root left. Add honey, wine and water, and simmer for half a day. In the mouth it is sweet and savoury, both meat and vegetable are tender and delicious, and whilst the cabbage root is soft, the vegetable still holds its shape. The soup is also delicious.

Qingzhou also has several delicacies, I'll list them out for you here...

Oh, and one more thing, there's a species of flower in Qingzhou called red lotus. It's got a lively and vibrant beauty, and opens with the wind. As it sways in the wind, the flower almost seems like it's smiling, and that beautiful smile reminds me most of Miss Caiwei.

~~You're just like a simple-minded and innocent~~ (Struck out) *You're a girl who brings everyone joy, with not a care in the world, innocent and unaffected by the dark corners of the world. And your bright and shining eyes, looking into them makes one forget all their worldly woes.*

The fourth letter:

Miss Fuxiang:

~~Half a month has passed, and I miss you oh so much. Thinking of your smile, thinking of your dress, thinking of your plump soft boobs and the scent of your body~~ (Struck out)

Half a month has passed, and I miss you oh so much. Now I'm just reaching the border of Qingzhou, tomorrow we head into Yunzhou. On the road, my colleagues have many times invited me to the Jiaofangsi, but I turned them down, because a Jiaofangsi without you is boring beyond measure.

I can't help but recall back to our passion-filled nights, when I would whisper into your ear: "Is my aim not proficient?"[^2], and you would lower your gaze in embarrassment. Oh, what beautiful times.

The trip to Yunzhou was more tiring than I expected, and there is long to go before we meet. I know that you're going crazy waiting for me, and when you miss me most, please remember to take care of your nails.

One more thing, there is a flower in Qingzhou called the red lotus. Its petals glow like fire, like the fire of your passion, a vibrancy that's hard to forget.

Xu Qi'an finished all of the letters for his fallback girls, and blew dry the ink. Staring that the paper full of corrections, strikethroughs, and blacked out bits of text, he sighed helplessly.

This is what it is like to handwrite, as you write you inevitably will make mistakes, write wrong characters, or write things you shouldn't have written. When he was writing essays as a young boy, he would make the same mistakes.

Oh well, they knew each other inside out anyway, they wouldn't think poorly of him because his letters were a bit scruffy.

As for the contents, he was rather proud — tailoring each to each woman's personality. Huaiqing liked politics and government, and so he wrote about the criminal case.

Lin'an liked stories, and so he wrote about the strange tales he had witnessed on the road.

Chu Caiwei was a foodie, and so he wrote about food.

As for Fuxiang, they've been under the covers so much already, the letter might as well be flirting, what more was needed?

Afterwards, he had to write letters for his family. Xu Qi'an left this until last, and after thinking for a long time, put some ink on his brush.

The fifth letter:

Dear Lingyue,

Your brother is well out in the country, but I do miss you. From so young your brother hasn't left your side for more than a couple days. Of course, I've also never left uncle and auntie.

Are you getting used to life in the inner city? The cost of living there is high, much more than the outer city, but don't be hard on yourself. Make sure to go out plenty, have a look at the silks and jewellery.

When I left, I left auntie three hundred taels of silver, that should be enough for the family for a while. Mm, when big brother is not at home, and second brother is in the academy, you need to make sure to take the initiative on matters, don't always listen to your silly mother.

If auntie suggests that you marry, then you get her to give that three hundred taels of silver back to me, get her to give the silk back to me. Big brother doesn't want to return home only to discover that you've already married.

One more thing, there's a flower in Qingzhou called the red lotus. It's as beautiful and graceful as you, as soft and delicate.

The sixth letter:

Auntie:

Please look after Lingyin well!

End of letter.

The seventh letter:

Uncle:

I'm very well at the moment. As of writing this letter, we've reached the border of Qingzhou and Yunzhou. As for what will happen in Yunzhou, I do not yet know.

Don't worry about me — men will experience ups and downs anyway eh? Didn't you and my dad fight your way out of the battlefield?

Recently, I've been attempting to reach Refining Spirit. I hope that when I return, uncle has also successfully reached this rank. When the time comes, the two spirits of Xu sounds mighty fine.

One more thing, I just remembered that you don't know too many characters right, so you wouldn't have been sending letters to Cijiu. I had always thought that as a father your heart would naturally be on your son, so I didn't think to leave him a note saying we'd moved... oh well, it's been half a month anyway, Cijiu should know now where we've gone.

Hopefully, it's just me worrying too much.

Once he had finished, Xu Qi'an folded up the letter paper, and with the five red petals put them into their respective envelopes.

Chapter 192. Slay an Enemy

According to the Geographic Records of the Great Feng, Yunzhou spanned sixty thousand li, abundant in resources such as agriculture, porcelain, and herbs and medicines. Before Emperor Wuzong's uprising, Yunzhou's wealth ranked in the top five among all the provinces of the Great Feng.

The national road stretched far, winding its way towards the horizon, flanked by black-soiled fields and rolling mountains in the distance.

The sun had just risen, and the air still held the chill of the previous night. A group of over a hundred people moved slowly along the road.

The sound of horse hooves mingled with the rumbling of carriage wheels.

"At the beginning of Yuanjing's reign, Yunzhou's population was five million. Then, every ten years, a new census was compiled, showing a gradual decline in population. By the 30th year of Yuanjing, the population was about 3.5 million. Now, in the 36th year of Yuanjing, with four years until the next census, who knows how much of the population is left?" Inspector Zhang said, lifting the curtain and sighing.

A reduction of 1.5 million people in 30 years was alarming, and the actual reduction would be even more significant. Given Yunzhou's fertile land and absence of natural disasters, there shouldn't have been any famine-related deaths.

This meant the population should have been steadily increasing through normal reproduction.

...From 5 million to 3.5 million isn't a simple subtraction; the actual population reduction might be at least twice as much... Xu Qi'an cursed under his breath: "What kind of place is this?"

Inspector Zhang glanced at him and continued, "The lost population is partly due to heavy taxation. People abandoned their fields, became vagrants, sought other livelihoods in cities, or turned to banditry—none of these people are recorded in the census.

"Additionally, rampant banditry has compounded the problem. Bandits plunder and pillage, further worsening the situation. Sometimes mountain bandits descend to abduct villagers to replenish their labour force. Of course, bandits are not recorded in the census either."

Xu Qi'an gazed silently into the distance, listening to Inspector Zhang, his mind analysing the facts at hand.

...In the first year of Yuanjing there were still 5 million people. By the 10th year, the population had already begun to decline. By the 30th year, it had decreased by 1.5 million, and the actual loss must be even greater... Yunzhou's sharp decline occurred over these twenty-plus years, roughly coinciding with Emperor Yuanjing's obsession with Taoism...

Could it be that the emperor's focus on Taoism gave the Church of the Warlock God an opportunity? The Church of the Warlock God's scheme, spanning over twenty years, couldn't be a minor disruption. A major conflict between Great Feng and the Church of the Warlock God's allied nations should be inevitable.

As he thought, Xu Qi'an's head tilted, and he almost fell asleep.

"You don't look well," Inspector Zhang scrutinised him with a frown. "What's wrong?"

Inspector Zhang remembered that Xu Qi'an had been disciplined on this journey, not frequenting the Jiaofangsi, so he shouldn't be this exhausted.

Xu Qi'an turned to the Inspector with a wry smile, "Nothing much, just mastering the art of time management."

This was his eighth sleepless day. His brain throbbed with pain, his blood vessels felt like they were about to burst, and during breakfast this morning, he even had a slight hallucination, thinking Xu Lingyin was stealing his meat bun.

His eyes were bloodshot, with dark circles underneath, reminding him of his days working the 996 in the "blessed" society. Occasionally, he even experienced 007[^1], looking equally miserable.

"Just two more days. If I can endure these two days, I should be able to advance to the Refining Spirit stage. I can't let myself fall asleep, or all this effort will be wasted... Why does my heart feel so uncomfortable..."

Xu Qi'an took a deep breath, removed his water pouch, and poured water over his head to stimulate his body and refresh his spirits.

...

A merchant caravan of three hundred people was traveling along the official road. Flatbed wagons carried goods covered with waterproof cloth, hiding the silk, tea leaves, porcelain, and cosmetics produced in Yunzhou.

There were also some special products from Yunzhou, such as snake inkstones and yellow gemstones.

The owner of the caravan was a burly man with a face full of scars named Zhao Long. He was a well-known figure in Yunzhou's Jianghu, respected in both legal and illegal circles.

Tired of the dangerous life of licking blood off the blade, he used his early reputation and connections to start a trading business.

He was adept at dealing with bandit strongholds along the way, ensuring a smooth passage out of Yunzhou and selling the goods across various regions, making a hefty profit.

Over time, many merchants were willing to pay a premium to join Zhao Long's caravan for the safety it provided.

Zhao Long's caravan eventually evolved into a combination of business and escort services.

Yang Yingying was one of those seeking shelter under this protective umbrella. She left Yunzhou as an independent traveler, paying twenty taels of silver for the caravan's protection.

After all, as a weak woman, it was impossible for her to leave Yunzhou alone. On any given day, she could be abducted by roadside bandits and made into a bandit bride.

With her looks, she would easily qualify for such a position.

Yang Yingying was originally a woman from the Jiaofangsi in Yunzhou. In her younger years, she was an oiran and later met a good man who redeemed her from the brothel, keeping her as a concubine.

Now over thirty, her beauty had not diminished. Instead, her figure had become more voluptuous, adding to her mature charm. Her bright apricot eyes glistened as she looked around.

Riding on horseback, Yang Yingying felt the intense gazes of the escorts around her. She tightened her cloak and lowered her head further.

At first glance, it seemed like she was protecting her ample bosom from the men's lecherous eyes, but she was actually guarding an item in her possession.

It was this very item that forced her to leave Yunzhou.

One of the escorts, his eyes full of lust, looked at Yang Yingying's back. Riding on horseback, her skirt clung to her body, highlighting the tempting curve of her buttocks.

The strong escort spurred his horse to catch up with Yang Yingying, grinning as he said, "Beauty, keep me company tonight. All the silver I earn from this trip will be yours. Ten taels of silver."

Yang Yingying ignored him, neither responding nor refusing, acting as if he did not exist.

The escort muttered a few more words and, seeing no response, cursed and rode off.

His familiar companions laughed and jeered, but each had a look of disappointment. This woman was impervious to both enticement and coercion, so they had no chance either.

A few escorts with blood on their hands had a vicious glint in their eyes. If not for running into Zhao Long, this lone traveling woman would have been devoured, leaving no bones behind.

At the front of the caravan, Zhao Long raised his hand to make a gesture. The escorts immediately drew their weapons, ready for anything, though their blades were only half unsheathed—an unspoken rule in the escort trade.

In the Jianghu, they sought wealth, not needless bloodshed, unless the power difference was vast. Moreover, Zhao Long had a certain reputation, or he wouldn't be in this business.

From the dense forest on either side of the narrow path, about seventy or eighty men suddenly emerged, brandishing gleaming swords and spears. More than twenty riders, all robust and well-equipped, emerged from the side path.

Zhao Long was puzzled. He traveled this route several times a year and knew exactly where to pay respects and which hilltops to honor. Since when had such a group of fierce bandits appeared in this forest? Zhao Long gestured for his escorts to stay calm and rode a short distance forward, shouting:

"I am Zhao Long. Friends, which road were you on before..."

As he got closer, he realised something was wrong. These fierce bandits had military crossbows at their waists and standard long swords in their hands, all military equipment.

Zhao Long had heard that some large bandit strongholds were well-equipped with military supplies, including swords, crossbows, and even guns, but those were the top of the top — they shouldn't have appeared here.

...

"Ningyan, you look like a man who's been drained by a woman," Song Tingfeng teased Xu Qi'an as they walked side by side.

Xu Qi'an glanced at him and said flatly, "I have a friend who wants to know if the Sitianjian has any pills for boosting vitality."

Song Tingfeng's smile froze.

"My friend is Zhu Guangxiao. Guangxiao, you have a fiancée; why push yourself so hard?" Song Tingfeng deflected the comment to Zhu Guangxiao.

Zhu Guangxiao gave him a silent look, feeling indignant, and retorted, "I cherish beauty, while you look too greedy. Every morning, the girls who sleep with you can't even get out of bed. You don't know how to restrain yourself and end up exhausting your body."

A martial artist's physique was robust, and their energy abundant, but even if one were as strong as a bull, working tirelessly from night till dawn would eventually lead to a depletion of vital energy.

"I'm just that good," Song Tingfeng retorted proudly, "Only the girls from Jiaofangsi can keep up with me, although even they struggle."

"Tingfeng..."

Hearing Xu Qi'an call him, Song Tingfeng turned his head, "What?"

"It's not that you're great; it's that they tolerate your inadequacies."

"Get lost."

As they bantered, Jiang Lyuzhong, the leader, suddenly said in a deep voice, "There's a scent of blood ahead. Everyone, prepare yourselves."

The sound of blades being drawn was uniform as the Huben Guards and Nightwatchers simultaneously unsheathed their swords and readied their crossbows.

"Forward!" Jiang Lyuzhong spurred his horse forward.

The Inspector General's team quickly shifted into a marching formation, advancing with remarkable speed and coordination.

After ten minutes, they reached a dense forest, and the air was thick with the smell of blood.

As they entered the forest, arrows shot out from both sides, targeting the charging Nightwatchers and Huben Guards.

Jiang Lyuzhong raised his hand and pressed down, creating an invisible wall of air that caused the arrows to fall helplessly to the ground.

He waved his hand and ordered, "Huben Guards, into the forest to kill the enemy."

As he spoke, Jiang Lyuzhong glanced ahead and saw hundreds of corpses strewn across the road, their blood staining the ground. Even the horses had been slaughtered, and the goods from the caravan were scattered everywhere.

Quickly assessing the situation, he realised that his order to rush had caught the bandits off guard. They hadn't had time to retreat and were now ambushing from the forest.

The sounds of fierce fighting erupted from the forest. The Huben Guards, one of the five elite units of the capital, though not as formidable as the Imperial Guards, were far superior to local troops.

The numbers on both sides were roughly equal, and the exchange of arrows and blades was intense.

Jiang Lyuzhong paused, somewhat surprised, and turned to Xu Qi'an, "Ningyan, have you ever killed anyone?"

"I've killed one and seriously injured another," Xu Qi'an reported casually, his eyes scanning the bodies of the caravan members.

Jiang Lyuzhong scoffed, "Still wet behind the ears."

The Nightwatchers burst into laughter.

Aside from Xu Qi'an, who had been a Nightwatcher for less than two months, the others were battle-hardened warriors, unflinching killers.

Pointing to the forest, Jiang Lyuzhong ordered, "Go and practice. Kill at least ten."

Xu Qi'an took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and replied, "Alright!"

Chapter 193. Survivor

Stepping into the stirrups, Xu Qi'an's warhorse from the Qingzhou barracks let out a distressed whinny and knelt on all fours as Xu Qi'an soared like a great bird into the dense forest.

With a flash of his black-gold sabre, a head was severed, and a fountain of blood spurted from the neck.

Don't look, don't look... Xu Qi'an's mind echoed with the tragic images of the slaughtered caravan, hardening his heart. His blade rose and fell, dispatching the lives of bandits one by one.

With his cultivation on the brink of entering the Refining Spirit realm, slaughtering these bandits was as effortless as cutting through vegetables. The sharpness of his black-gold sabre, which could slice through iron like mud, made it impossible for anyone to withstand even a single strike from him.

"Whoosh!"

A scorching blade light slashed from behind, slicing through the branches and leaves silently, leaving neat, even cuts.

Xu Qi'an's formidable mental strength alerted him to the attack. He twisted his waist, spun around, and shattered the incoming blade light with his sabre. He saw a man wielding a large steel blade.

This man had just cleaved through a Tiger Guard blocking his way and was now charging at Xu Qi'an with a sinister grin. Simultaneously, two lean men with standard military sabres flanked Xu Qi'an from both sides.

Xu Qi'an was suddenly caught in a dangerous situation, surrounded by fierce bandits.

On the official road, Jiang Lyuzhong, who had been watching the battle with squinted eyes, laughed, "Those three bandits are quite skilled. One is at the peak of the Refining Qi realm, while the other two are not far behind but still formidable."

Hearing this, a Silver Gong asked, "Should we help him?"

The Nightwatchers all turned to Jiang Lyuzhong, waiting for his command.

In their view, Xu Qi'an, with his Refining Qi realm cultivation, couldn't possibly fend off three skilled opponents of the same level. Moreover, he was still inexperienced in killing and lacked combat experience.

On the battlefield, experience could be as crucial as cultivation.

Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng knew Xu Qi'an was on the verge of breaking through to the Refining Spirit realm, but this was not necessarily a good thing since he was currently exhausted, affecting his combat strength.

Jiang Lyuzhong secretly prepared to intervene, his fingers forming a sword shape, ready to rescue Xu Qi'an at any moment. "Wait a bit longer," he said.

Three at the Refining Qi realm... The man with the steel blade is at the peak of the Refining Qi realm... The other two are not far behind... Are Yunzhou's bandits so highly skilled? Xu Qi'an wondered, gripping his sabre, his expression calm. He stepped forward to meet the man with the steel blade head-on while visualising a roaring golden lion in his mind.

"Roar!"

A deep roar erupted from his throat, shaking the forest and causing both sides of the battle to momentarily freeze.

The man with the steel blade felt as if thunder had exploded in his ears. His pupils briefly dilated, as his mind seemed to be plunged into quicksand.

That split second of hesitation sealed his fate.

"Slash!"

The black-gold sabre gleamed as it cleaved the man with the steel blade in two, his shattered organs mixing with the blood on the ground.

After killing one, Xu Qi'an pursued his advantage, turning swiftly and visualising a giant in his mind. For an instant, he transformed into a war god, his aura surging.

"Clang... Slash..."

One of the lean men tried to block with his sabre but was easily overpowered. The black-gold sabre cut through his chest.

Seeing the dire situation, the other lean man turned to flee, only to be intercepted by the Huben Guards' volley of arrows. Xu Qi'an caught up, visualised the roaring golden lion again, and with a swing of his sabre, ended the man's life.

The entire process took only a few moments.

This... The Nightwatchers watching the battle exclaimed in awe.

"His energy is far more potent than that of a typical peak Refining Qi cultivator. Even I would only be slightly stronger than him," a Gold Gong said in shock.^[^1]

"We should be more concerned about where he learned the Buddhist visualisation technique. That was the Lion's Roar," another Gold Gong added.

"There's also the fact that he seems to be practicing two visualisation techniques simultaneously... and both have reached a high level. He is already capable of advancing to the Refining Spirit realm."

"He has only been with the Nightwatchers for two months."

As they discussed, the Silver Gongs fell silent, their expressions complex.

The Bronze Gongs were even more astonished, staring in disbelief at Xu Qi'an. Their minds replayed the scene of him effortlessly slaughtering three skilled bandits.

Even among those at the Refining Qi realm, Xu Qi'an's combat power was extraordinary. While the Nightwatchers were generally stronger than ordinary martial artists, they weren't *that* powerful.

Xu Qi'an's ability to kill three skilled martial artists in such a short time without sustaining any injuries meant that none of the Bronze Gongs could last more than ten moves against him, even accounting for the advantages of their magical artefacts.

Normally, they joked and got along as equals, but now they realised that Xu Qi'an could easily defeat ten of them.

Jiang Lyuzhong knew that Xu Qi'an's ultimate technique, "One Blade from Heaven and Earth" had not even been used.

...

After cleaning up the bandits, the Huben Guards emerged from the dense forest with a group of 25 civilians bound with rope. Upon questioning, they found out that these people were merchants.

One woman in particular stood out, not with the delicate slenderness of a young girl but with the ripe allure of a peach, an appeal only an experienced connoisseur could truly appreciate.

"Thank you, officers, thank you..." The rescued merchants expressed their endless gratitude, kneeling and kowtowing repeatedly.

Inspector Zhang reassured them with a kind demeanour, revealing his identity and promising to escort them back to Baidi City, the central hub of Yunzhou.

"Let's bury these bodies and gather the goods. We'll take everything with us," Zhang instructed.

Jiang Lyuzhong nodded and ordered the Huben Guards to get to work.

"Wait a moment!"

Xu Qi'an, who had been inspecting the scene, called out, halting the Huben Guards.

Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong looked at him inquisitively as Xu Qi'an walked over, frowning. "Something's off."

"Hmm?" Jiang Lyuzhong scanned the surroundings and focused his senses for a moment. "There are no ambushes nearby."

This seemed like a straightforward bandit robbery, the kind that happened daily in Yunzhou.

"It's not an ambush," Xu Qi'an shook his head. "I checked the scene and found that most of the dead are guards. The merchants and common folk are unharmed, and the goods are intact. The bandits didn't even rip the waterproof tarps to check the spoils."

"Isn't it odd," Xu Qi'an continued, "that the bandits ignored such valuable cargo, leaving it scattered around?"

Inspector Zhang pondered. "Maybe they didn't have time to gather the loot."

Xu Qi'an asked, "Then why did they have time to bind people? If I were a bandit, I would prioritise the goods. I would kill the common folk too, rather than waste time tying them up. Unless..."

Jiang Lyuzhong and Inspector Zhang exchanged a look. The former furrowed his brow. "Unless their target wasn't the goods, but the people?"

Xu Qi'an nodded, glancing at the survivors who were still shaken. "Let's ask them."

He beckoned a middle-aged merchant over and asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm a silk merchant from Baidi City, transporting two thousand bolts of silk to Qingzhou for business. Fearing bandits along the way, I joined Master Zhao's caravan for safety... uh, Zhao Long. He's quite influential, respected in both the Jianghu and legitimate circles. His caravans are usually very safe.

"I've partnered with him many times, but who could have predicted today... Ah, always hunting geese, but now a goose has pecked my eye. Zhao Long was a capable and trustworthy man. Such a pity."

Xu Qi'an glanced at the dead caravan members, noting that Zhao Long was among them.

He continued questioning the survivors, finding that they were all merchants traveling together. Finally, he reached the voluptuous woman.

She appeared to be in her early thirties, which in Xu Qi'an's era was still considered youthful.

"And you?" Xu Qi'an scrutinised her. "Why were you, a lone woman, traveling to Qingzhou?"

Yang Yingying hesitated, lowering her head and speaking softly. "A few years ago, my husband went to Qingzhou to make a living. Recently, he sent a letter saying his business was thriving and he wanted to bring me to Qingzhou to settle down. But due to business commitments, he couldn't come himself, so he asked me to join a trustworthy caravan to Qingzhou.

"I inquired extensively and heard that Master Zhao's caravan was the best, both safe and reliable."

Her explanation was plausible and seemingly flawless.

She seems calm... But as an ordinary woman witnessing such bloodshed, shouldn't she be pale and distressed, clinging to anyone for comfort? Also, she kept looking down as she spoke, as if reciting a rehearsed script, a sign of insecurity...

Xu Qi'an said, "I have a few questions for you."

Yang Yingying glanced up at him briefly before lowering her head again, her voice soft and timid. "Please ask, sir."

"What is your husband's name?"

Yang Yingying appeared to be contemplating her response.

"Where do you live?"

"..."

"What are your husband's distinguishing features?"

"..."

"How tall is your husband?"

"..."

"What did your husband write in his letter? Please recite a few lines. What does he do for a living?"

Yang Yingying stood there, bewildered and helpless. After a long silence, she finally spoke softly, "My husband's name is..."

"That's enough. Stop talking," Xu Qi'an interrupted, then called to the Huben Guards, "Search her."

"???" Yang Yingying looked at him, bewildered and at a loss. The officer's actions were completely beyond her expectations.

She took a step back in fear, crossing her arms over her chest, her expression one of biting her lip in shame and anger.

"You took too long to think," Xu Qi'an said with a smile, scrutinising the beautiful woman. "If a wife needs a long time to recall her husband's name and features, how can anyone believe her?"

"Lies aren't convincing just because you make up a few sentences. If you don't want to be searched, tell the truth. Why did those bandits intercept you?"

After the harsh words, seeing the woman's face gradually pale, Xu Qi'an tried to reassure her, "My superior here is an Inspector General sent by the court. There's no higher authority in Yunzhou. Whatever you have to say, just say it."

Yang Yingying looked at Inspector Zhang, who nodded and said, "I am here by imperial command to inspect Yunzhou. A mere commoner like you is not worth deceiving."

Lowering her head, Yang Yingying weighed her options and realised she had no choice. Suddenly, she bit her lip, fell to her knees, and said, "I am Yang Yingying. I am heading to Qingzhou to escape misfortune and seek justice from Yang, the Commissioner of Qingzhou, for my husband. I want revenge."

Inspector Zhang didn't respond immediately. After a moment of contemplation, he asked, "Who is your husband? Why do you seek justice from Yang?"

Yang Yingying cried, "My husband is Zhou Min."

Inspector Zhang exclaimed, "What?!"

Xu Qi'an and Jiang Lyuzhong turned abruptly to stare at Yang Yingying.

Zhou Min, the Nightwatcher spy who had died in Yunzhou, was the one who had revealed that Yang Chuannan, the Military Commissioner of Yunzhou, was colluding with bandits, diverting military supplies for profit, and fostering bandits to strengthen his own power.

Shortly after his secret message reached the capital, Zhou Min mysteriously died.

Chapter 194. Foolish Lin'an Still Has Her Uses

Zhou Min's Widow?

Xu Qi'an's first reaction upon hearing this was: she's lying.

Apart from clerks, officials in Great Feng, from provincial governors to county magistrates, are all from other regions.

As a clerk in the Yunzhou Military Command, Zhou Min wouldn't be an exception. Besides, his official title as a clerk masked his true identity as a Nightwatcher operative.

Would Wei Yuan allow an operative to bring his wife and children along? That would turn them into double agents instantly.

"Zhou Min?" Inspector Zhang frowned. "What grievance does he have?"

He adopted an air of **"Who the hell is Zhou Min, this official has never heard of the man."**

Yang Yingying lamented, "My husband was originally a clerk in the Yunzhou Military Command."

Inspector Zhang was taken aback, his attitude shifting dramatically as he bent down to help the kneeling Yang Yingying to her feet. "So you're the wife of Clerk Zhou. What happened to him? And why are you traveling all the way to Qingzhou to file a complaint?"

"Qingzhou and Yunzhou are of equal rank. Chief Minister Yang may not take on this case. Hmm, I am the Inspector General overseeing Yunzhou, and the three departments here must listen to me. What grievance do you have? Speak freely."

It turns out that not only women are born actresses, but officials are also top-notch performers... Xu Qi'an remained silent, watching Zhang's solo performance.

Yang Yingying hesitated, then looked at Inspector Zhang and said, "Sir, may I see your appointment document or official seal?"

At these words, Inspector Zhang and the Nightwatchers all frowned.

The Silver Gongs and Bronze Gongs instinctively placed their hands on their weapon hilts, scrutinising Yang Yingying.

These were not words an ordinary woman could say, even if she were a clerk's wife.

She knows her stuff... Xu Qi'an also gripped his sword hilt, staring seriously at Yang Yingying. The woman showed no signs of qi fluctuation and didn't appear to be a martial artist based on her body fat distribution.

But this only ruled out her being a martial artist; other systems with their myriad techniques could not be dismissed lightly.

Inspector Zhang took two steps back without a change in expression and said, "Gold Gong Jiang, please fetch my documents and seal."

Coward... Jiang Lyuzhong shot him a glance, then fetched the documents and seal.

Inspector Zhang did not take them but instead looked at Yang Yingying, "Since you are the wife of Clerk Zhou, we permit you to inspect them."

Jiang Lyuzhong stepped forward, displaying the documents and seal.

Yang Yingying examined them carefully, her eyes searching for the words "Yunzhou" and "Inspector General," and then seeing the bright red seal, she had no more doubts.

Up to this point, the willingness of the other party to engage with her, a mere woman, for so long was in itself a sign of sincerity.

Yang Yingying knelt again and kowtowed, "I am Yang Yingying, formerly a woman of the Jiaofangsi in Yunzhou. Years ago, I fell in love with Master Zhou, left my life of disgrace, and have since been serving him..."

Everyone gave a knowing look of realisation.

...So she's a courtesan, no wonder she's more knowledgeable than ordinary women, even knowing to ask for documents and seals. Xu Qi'an understood.

In this era, courtesans were the highly educated women among their peers, skilled in various arts and crafts.

Yang Yingying briefly recounted her past with Zhou Min, frankly stating that she was his kept woman, whom he would visit periodically.

"Not long ago, Master Zhou came to me in a hurry, handed me something, and said he might be in danger soon. If something happened to him, I should hide and then find a way to leave Yunzhou to deliver this item to Commissioner Yang in Qingzhou.

"Soon after, I received the news of his death..." Yang Yingying's tears fell as she choked on her words, sobbing, "I was both grieving and frightened, so I hid at a friend's house, asking her to gather information for me.

"After hiding for a while, my friend told me that Zhao's caravan was going to Qingzhou soon. I borrowed twenty taels of silver from her, bought a horse, and left Yunzhou with the caravan..."

The rest of the story, everyone knew.

Xu Qi'an watched coldly, observing Yang Yingying's micro-expressions. This time, her eyes did not waver, her voice was mournful, full of genuine emotion.

No signs of deception could be seen.

Thus Xu Qi'an searched for clues in Yang Yingying's words—Zhou Min never exposed his identity as a Nightwatcher operative, not even to someone he could fully trust. This indicated that Zhou Min was a competent operative.

If he had easily revealed his identity, it would have been suspicious.

As for why he wanted to go to Qingzhou to find Ziyang Jushi instead of another neighboring province, Xu Qi'an surmised that Zhou Min didn't trust anyone else and only trusted this great scholar from the Cloud Deer Academy.

Firstly, compared to ordinary scholars, great scholars from the Cloud Deer Academy were more trustworthy due to their cultivation system. After all, scoundrels couldn't follow the Confucian path.

Secondly, there was a doctrinal dispute between scholars from the Cloud Deer Academy and those from the Imperial Academy. Following the principle that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, seeking out Ziyang Jushi was the right choice.

Inspector Zhang frowned, "You suspect Zhou Min was murdered."

Yang Yingying nodded vigorously, "It's quite obvious, isn't it? Please seek justice for my husband."

"This..." Inspector Zhang pondered for a moment, "Very well, we agree. Now, hand over what Clerk Zhou left you."

Yang Yingying immediately kowtowed, "Thank you, sir."

Xu Qi'an couldn't help but view Inspector Zhang differently. His cunning was admirable; no wonder he was a seasoned official under Wei Yuan.

Yang Yingying straightened up, reached into her bosom, and pulled out half of a jade pendant, presenting it with both hands, "This is what Master Zhou gave me that night."

All eyes focused on the jade pendant.

It was a semi-circular piece of jade, entirely a stunning shade of translucent green. It should have been a round piece, but it had been cut in half by a sharp instrument.

Jiang Lyuzhong took the jade pendant and handed it to Inspector Zhang, who rubbed it between his fingers, lost in thought.

"This looks like a token?" Jiang Lyuzhong whispered, then looked at Xu Qi'an for his opinion.

Inspector Zhang also looked over.

Why are you looking at me? I can investigate a case, but I'm not a fortune-teller... Your attitude of treating me as a tool is quite blatant... Xu Qi'an pondered, "Let's head to Yunzhou first. Guessing is pointless."

Inspector Zhang put away the jade pendant and instructed the soldiers, "Continue on, to Yunzhou."

They buried the corpses on the spot, collected the surviving merchants and their goods, and continued their journey along the official road towards Yunzhou.

....

The sun shone brightly, bringing a gentle warmth. On this rare fine morning, Princess Huaiqing had finished her sword practice and was about to call for a maid to prepare hot water, when she turned and saw two maids playing go in the pavilion.

Huaiqing frowned, not because the maids were playing go, but because they wouldn't understand the game in the first place.

She silently approached the pavilion and watched the maids play.

The pretty little maids were engrossed in their game, oblivious to their mistress's presence.

They played without strategy, ignorant of positioning or securing advantageous spots, placing their pieces rapidly, almost without thinking.

Huaiqing's frown deepened. This childish way of playing was excruciating for her, a go master. But after watching for a while, she understood.

The game was simple: whoever lined up five pieces first, whether vertically, horizontally, or diagonally, would win.

Unable to resist, she asked, "What game is this?"

The two maids jumped in fright, hurriedly standing up and softly replied, "It's Five-in-a-row."

Five-in-a-row? What's that?

The well-read Huaiqing was puzzled.

One maid explained, "It's a game that came from Princess Lin'an. It's spread throughout the palace now, and everyone is playing it."

By "everyone," she meant the eunuchs and maids in the palace.

"Even Concubine Chen said it was interesting," added the other maid.

Lin'an? She's just a silly girl... Huaiqing nodded, "I want to take a bath. No need to prepare lunch."

Emperor Yuanjing was hosting a family banquet this morning, and the princes and princesses would dine in Qianqing Palace.

After her bath, Princess Huaiqing left her garden and headed towards Qianqing Palace.

In the luxurious hall, she met her siblings. In her absence, the talkative Lin'an, who loved to wear red dresses and elaborate jewelry, was the center of attention.

Today was a bit different. Her brothers and sisters merely nodded in greeting to Huaiqing and then resumed their conversation.

"Lin'an has created a new game. The rules of Five-in-a-row are simple and easy to understand. Even the attendants in my palace have picked it up quickly and are enjoying it."

"Our Princess Lin'an's name will become widely known."

The round-faced, charming Lin'an enjoyed the praise from her siblings, her smile sweet, yet she tried to remain modest.

She looked like a proud little hen trying hard not to show off.

Seeing Huaiqing enter, she raised her chin slightly, displaying a proud demeanor.

Be jealous of me, be jealous of me... Lin'an chanted in her heart, glancing at Huaiqing out of the corner of her eye.

But the aloof Huaiqing simply sat down, sipped some tea, and ignored her foolish sister.

Hmph... Huaiqing is definitely jealous of me. Lin'an consoled herself inwardly.

Princess Huaiqing was not a sociable royal daughter. It wasn't just her pride; her interests were too different from her siblings'. While the princesses discussed beautiful clothes and cosmetics, she was interested in the Four Books and the Five Classics.

When the princes discussed politics and grand strategies, she would ask: How to solve the disasters of water? How to manage the officials?

The princes would feel uncomfortable; *who knows? We're discussing grand strategies and macro issues, and you're nit-picking.*

Near noon, eunuchs from Emperor Yuanjing's palace came to invite the princes and princesses over.

Lin'an trotted behind her elder brother, the crown prince, her skirt fluttering. Suddenly, she heard Huaiqing's voice behind her, "Lin'an."

Lin'an couldn't help but smile, her expression uncontrollable with pride, "What?"

Once the other princes had walked far enough, Huaiqing said indifferently, "Who taught you Five-in-a-row?"

"I invented it myself." Lin'an was conflicted. Xu Qi'an had taught her, and she shouldn't claim it as her own, but the compliments were too tempting, and ultimately she couldn't resist.

I'll tell them Xu Ningyan taught me later... she thought.

"When Father asks later, you should say the same thing." Huaiqing walked away, her cool, pleasant voice carrying a warning:

"Father doesn't like that guy. Be mindful when you speak."

After a small pause, she added, "If you have a brain."

Lin'an swallowed the words "Why" and, like a feisty little lion, chased after Huaiqing claws flailing, angrily shouting:

"You're the one without a brain! You're the one without a brain!"

"I'm prettier and smarter than you. See, Xu Ningyan is willing to work for me, but not for you."

Huaiqing suddenly stopped, glaring sternly.

Lin'an, like an agile cat, jumped back, then felt she was too cowardly and stubbornly glared back with her peach blossom eyes.

Princess Huaiqing raised her hand.

"Brother Crown Prince, Huaiqing is going to hit me!" Lin'an screamed as she ran away.

At the banquet, Emperor Yuanjing did indeed ask about it.

How did Huaiqing know Father would ask... Lin'an was shocked, glancing at her annoying sister. Huaiqing's beautiful face remained expressionless as she ate.

Lin'an's eyes rolled back, as she sweetly said, "Because Lin'an is Father's daughter, and Father is the smartest person in the world."

Emperor Yuanjing laughed heartily.

Father has always been watching what's happening in the palace, just as he silently oversees the court... Huaiqing continued eating without any change in expression.

She hadn't cultivated her own confidants in the palace and never actively sought out palace gossip. She didn't even know about the recently popular Five-in-a-row.

It wasn't that Huaiqing didn't know; she didn't want to know.

Princess Huaiqing had to admit, though Lin'an was extremely foolish, even a useless person could be of use, depending on how you used them.

At least when it came to pleasing Father, no one in the palace could surpass Lin'an, including those concubines who were either out of favour or had been favoured.

Chapter 195. This is the Prefecture Government

Crossing two provinces and three counties, the Inspector General's team finally arrived at the main city of Yunzhou—Baidi City.

The name Baidi City had a historical origin, dating back to the previous dynasty, about 1,300 years ago. At that time, Yunzhou suffered from a severe drought, with lands barren for miles.

The people had no harvest and no means to live.

That year, a strange beast came from overseas. It resembled a deer, covered in snow-white scales, with a pair of horns on its head, hooves like a horse, and a snake-like tail.

Wherever it went, dark clouds gathered, and heavy rain poured. This beast roamed Yunzhou for over a month, filling reservoirs and revitalising dried rivers and lakes, ending the drought in Yunzhou.

The court regarded it as an auspicious creature, and named it Baidi — the White Emperor.

Xu Qi'an looked at the majestic outline of Baidi City and asked with a smile, "So, is this legend true?"

Inspector Zhang, who was looking at Baidi City and recounting this story, nodded:

"It should be true; otherwise, it wouldn't be recorded in the history books. Droughts and floods are common occurrences, and historians wouldn't fabricate history for such events. However, since then, no one has ever seen the auspicious beast Baidi again."

Clearly, it was an overseas monster, perhaps even a sea beast, and maybe it was just touring the nine provinces. Seeing Yunzhou's drought, it intervened to change the environment... Xu Qi'an analyzed from a "scientific perspective" while saying:

"Excellent insight, sir."

After speaking, he continued to gaze at the city walls, a poem coming to mind:

In morning of rosy clouds, Baidi city I depart;

One thousand li to Jiangling, yet only one day apart.

On both banks, apes are calling without rest;

This little boat passing myriad mountains far.^[1]

One thousand li to Jiangling, yet only one day apart... so luxurious. If it were me, it would take today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and thirty-one days in a month before I'd be willing to return, Xu Qi'an thought.

He couldn't help but recall a travel advertisement he had seen, encouraging high-level executives to fly straight to Thailand after work on Friday, enjoy a day of leisure, and return on Sunday.

Everyone living like modern-day Li Bai.

The soldiers guarding the gate of Baidi City stopped the group. After examining the court-issued documents, they respectfully allowed them to pass.

Once inside the city, Xu Qi'an looked around, noticing many passers by carrying swords and sabres among the bustling crowd.

The strict control of weapons in the Great Feng meant that in cities, from provinces to counties, one could not carry swords unless in special professions, like bodyguards.

But even bodyguards could only be armed when on duty.

"Is this characteristic of Yunzhou?" Xu Qi'an wondered.

At this moment, Inspector Zhang lifted the curtain again and said to Xu Qi'an, "Ningyan, have someone send these merchants home. The goods can wait. Let the merchants bring their accounts and come to the station tomorrow to verify and retrieve their goods."

Xu Qi'an had a thought, "What about Zhao Long's goods?"

Inspector Zhang replied, "Naturally, they should be returned. Zhao Long and the bodyguards were all killed, and their families must be compensated. Now that Zhao Long is dead, returning the goods can somewhat make up for their loss."

Xu Qi'an gave a thumbs-up, "Sir, you are truly a good eel."

Inspector Zhang frowned, "What do you mean by that?"

"Nothing, nothing," Xu Qi'an turned to find Song Tingfeng and relay the instructions, telling him to handle it.

"Why should I be the errand boy?" Song Tingfeng protested, "It's like I'm your subordinate. We're on the same level."

Xu Qi'an turned and shouted, "Inspector, Song Tingfeng is shirking his duties and being lazy. Deduct his pay."

Song Tingfeng quickly said, "I'll do it, I'll do it."

He then turned to Zhu Guangxiao, told him what to do, and instructed him to handle it.

Zhu Guangxiao grumbled, "Ningyan told you to do it."

Song Tingfeng said, "Xu Ningyan, Zhu Guangxiao is shirking his duties and being lazy."

"...", Zhu Guangxiao, sulking, turned his horse around and took a few Guards with him to complete the task.

The two rascals sighed together:

"Guangxiao is such a hard-working and honest man."

"Indeed, whether in bed or at work."

...

Office of the Military Commissioner.

Yang Chuannan, in his early forties, was a calm and composed scholar. He was also a fifth-rank martial artist.

Born into a military family, Yang Chuannan was exceptionally talented, having a passion for both martial arts and literature. In the 12th year of Yuanjing, he passed the imperial examination, and due to his extensive family education and thorough knowledge of military strategy, secured a position in the Ministry of War.

In the 16th year of Yuanjing, he was assigned to Yunzhou. Due to his merits in suppressing bandits, he gradually rose to the position of Military Commissioner, becoming one of the three most powerful figures in Yunzhou.

As Yang Chuannan was handling official duties in his office, he suddenly looked up. A few seconds later, the sound of footsteps approached, and a woman in light armor strode in without any officials stopping her along the way.

She had a tall and slender figure, with a sword at her waist and a silver spear on her back. Her sharp, oval face and delicate, beautiful features exuded a heroic aura rather than feminine softness.

Furthermore, she had her long hair tied in a high ponytail, revealing a smooth and attractive forehead.

"The Inspector General has entered the city," she said directly upon entering, cutting straight to the point.

Yang Chuannan paused and then nodded slightly, "I know."

"That damned Yuanjing Emperor, always indulging in immortality pursuits, an earthly emperor dreaming of eternal life—what a delusion, a damned—" she began to rant.

"Miaozhen!" Yang Chuannan frowned.

Li Miaozhen^[^2] sneered, "It's not as if I'm eating out of the crown's hand."

She leaned her silver spear against the wall, sat cross-legged on the tea table in the reception area, and placed her sword across her knees. "With the Inspector here, you'll have to hand over your military authority. That's the law in Feng. What are you going to do?"

"Since it's the law, I will naturally comply," Yang Chuannan replied.

Li Miaozhen nodded, "I will help you."

Yang Chuannan glanced at her and shook his head helplessly. "No wonder so many people in the martial world are willing to serve you. Lady Flying Swallow, I owe you one. But be cautious, there is a Gold Gong among the accompanying team. A fourth-rank expert, a formidable hero in the martial world."

Li Miaozhen was indifferent. "What is there to fear? Anyone below third rank cannot withstand an army."

...

The food in Yunzhou is somewhat numbing and spicy, with a preference for strong flavours. I don't like the cuisine here... doesn't eating spicy food too often give you hemorrhoids? Xu Qi'an silently grumbled while eating the steaming hot food in the inn.

The main hall was crowded with Nightwatchers and Huben Guards, with eight people crammed around a table.

Baidi City had four inns, and this one was the largest, with a large courtyard and two adjacent three-story buildings. It had one manager and seven attendants.

For safety reasons, Yang Yingying also had to stay in the inn. She sat alone at a table, quietly eating her meal.

The young woman's figure was plump and alluring. Sitting down, her dress clung tightly to her hips, outlining a voluptuous curve.

Xu Qi'an noticed Song Tingfeng staring at her buttocks and kicked him under the table. "What are you looking at?"

After scolding, he took a few glances himself.

"So what if we look? Everyone else is looking," Song Tingfeng whispered.

Men are like this. When they see a beautiful woman, they can't help but take a few extra glances, unable to control their gaze unless their wife is right next to them.

"Alright, alright, I'll stop, it'll just make me uncomfortable," Song Tingfeng muttered.

Earlier, Inspector Zhang had ordered that during their time in Yunzhou, they were not to visit the Jiaofangsi or leave the inn unless on duty.

Xu Qi'an raised his hand and clenched his fist.

"What are you doing?" Song Tingfeng asked, puzzled.

"This is called the unyielding grip. You should learn it privately."

After dinner, Inspector Zhang invited Xu Qi'an and Jiang Lyuzhong to his room to discuss matters. The Inspector General, with a background as a Censor, looked at the two experienced Nightwatchers and said:

"Because of the banditry, Yunzhou has lifted the ban on personal weapons. Thus, compared to daytime, the nights are actually safer due to the strict curfew.

"Gold Gong Jiang must protect me at all times, so the investigation will be temporarily entrusted to Ningyan. You can freely command the Nightwatchers and Huben Guards in the inn."

... So I really am just a tool, huh. Xu Qi'an glanced at Inspector Zhang without speaking.

The Inspector explained, "In the first few days, I will have to attend many social engagements and need to get a feel for the political landscape in Yunzhou."

Alright... Xu Qi'an accepted the explanation. "Understood, I will do my utmost."

Inspector Zhang nodded in satisfaction and asked, "How do you plan to start the investigation?"

"I will first go to the government office to get Zhou Min's belongings and then visit his home," Xu Qi'an replied.

"No need to exhume the body for an autopsy?" Inspector Zhang frowned.

"I was just waiting for sir to ask," Xu Qi'an grinned, "The body has been dead for over half a month, the decomposed skin is bloated and will burst at the slightest touch, and the fluid in the corpse would be enough for any man to drink his fill."

Jiang Lyuzhong, who had just eaten, turned pale, while Inspector Zhang retched.

"Then I shall take my leave," Xu Qi'an slipped away.

Leaving the room and going downstairs, he gathered Song Tingfeng, Zhu Guangxiao, four Bronze Gongs, a familiar Silver Gong, and six Huben Guards. They mounted their horses and headed towards the government office.

Zhou Min was a registered court official. Whenever a court official passed away, the government office was responsible for conducting an autopsy to determine the cause of death. For officials like Zhou Min, whose family was not local, the government office also had to safeguard his belongings until his family or the court came to claim them.

Controlling the pace of his horse, Xu Qi'an occasionally glanced at the map of Baidi City given by the courier. After nearly an hour of navigating, he finally saw the gates of the prefecture government office.

"According to official protocols, a portion of such belongings—up to thirty percent, and sometimes even fifty percent for the greedy ones—are often pocketed. I wonder how much of Zhou's belongings remain," remarked Tang, the Silver Gong.

This was the first time Xu Qi'an had heard of such an unwritten rule, and he frowned, "Does the Great Feng's code of law have any punishments for such actions?"

"Of course," Tang replied, "Embezzling a court official's inheritance, depending on the severity, could result in fifty strokes or even dismissal and fines."

Xu Qi'an nodded and suddenly asked, "Is the Nightwatcher's constabulary the same?"

"No way. Duke Wei strictly forbids it. Plus, we're different from these officials; Nightwatchers are comrades who fight together and visit brothels together. Anyone daring to embezzle would face the wrath of his brothers," Tang explained.

Song Tingfeng laughed and nodded, "Exactly. If you die, Ningyan, and anyone tries to pocket your compensation, I'd take his damned life."

I feel like there's something wrong with what you just said... Xu Qi'an decided not to argue with the squinty-eyed Song Tingfeng.

Entering the government office and revealing their identities, a seventh-rank official in a green robe came out to greet them, introducing himself as the Administrative registrar.

"To prevent theft by servants, all of Zhou Min's belongings are stored in the office's warehouse."

This registrar, responsible for reception, accounting, and storage, led Xu Qi'an and the others to the warehouse. Holding a heavy bunch of keys, he expertly found the right one and unlocked the iron door of the warehouse.

Among Zhou Min's belongings were paintings, clothes, antiques, writing tools, and other items. Xu Qi'an meticulously inspected each item.

Seeing that only thirty taels of silver remained, he said sternly, "Officer, this isn't right. Zhou Min was a sixth-grade official, in service for over twenty years. Even if he saved just one tael a year, there should be more than this."

"Sir, there are twenty taels," the registrar chuckled.

You still dare to joke with me?

Xu Qi'an glared at him, "Embezzling a court official's inheritance, depending on the value, could result in fifty strokes or even dismissal and fines."

Zhou Min was an undercover agent for the Nightwatchers. He had died in service, and his family far away in his hometown still didn't know the news. Though Xu Qi'an couldn't bring him back to life, he could ensure that his belongings were returned to his family.

He should do this.

An outright fool... The registrar, an old hand, shrugged helplessly, "Perhaps Zhou Min squandered his money on women or other pleasures. This is all he left."

He wore a smug expression, confident that the government office had the final say on the inheritance. *Unhappy? What could you do? Bring the dead back to life?*

Xu Qi'an pointed to his badge, "Do the officials in Yunzhou not recognise the Nightwatchers?"

The registrar scoffed, "The Nightwatchers oversee officials; of course, I've heard of them."

So you've only heard but never experienced... You need a taste of the Nightwatchers' discipline...

Xu Qi'an kicked the officer hard in the stomach.

With a thud, the registrar's fat body slammed into the wall, causing dust to fall. He curled up in pain, his face contorted, and after a few seconds, he started to moan.

Xu Qi'an drew his sword and placed it against the officer's neck, looking down at him. "I came to Yunzhou with the Inspector General to investigate a case. I have the authority to act as I see fit. Even if I kill you, the Inspector will cover for me. Do you believe it?"

The registrar took several heavy breaths, incredulous, and stressed, "This is the prefecture government."

Chapter 196. Analysing the Case

The Prefecture Government?

So what? I even dare to kill people at the gates of the Ministry of Law. Killing a mere seventh-grade official like you isn't difficult at all.

Xu Qi'an pressed down, and the sharp black-gold blade instantly cut through the back of the registrar's neck. The registrar felt the pain and the warm blood flowing out.

He's really going to kill me... The registrar's heart tightened as he looked at the other Nightwatchers in panic, hoping they would stop their lawless colleague.

But Song Tingfeng and the others' calm, indifferent, and hands-off attitudes made the registrar's heart sink. He had heard of the notorious Nightwatchers, especially their arrogance, but he didn't believe they would dare to kill a court official in government premises.

Song Tingfeng met the registrar's gaze and squinted his eyes with a smile, "registrar registrar, you embezzled a court official's inheritance. Even if we don't kill you now, once you're in prison, we have ways to deal with you."

Tang, the Silver Gong, added, "This is just our usual method. By then, it won't just be about the inheritance."

"This official... understands his mistake." The registrar finally conceded.

Only then did Xu Qi'an sheathe his knife and kick the registrar, "Go, gather everyone who took the silver to the main hall. I will question each one of them."

The registrar, clutching his bleeding neck, stumbled away.

Once the registrar was out of sight, Xu Qi'an resumed examining the belongings.

"Are you worried that valuable clues might have been embezzled, hindering the investigation?"

Tang, the Silver Gong, asked.

"If Zhou Min had really left clues among his belongings, he wouldn't have chosen valuable items that could easily tempt others," Xu Qi'an said, looking up at him, "I just want to retrieve Zhou Min's belongings to hand them over to his family once the case is closed."

"Your integrity is admirable," Tang praised, then added, "though you do have a weakness for women."

No, this is basic decency... People who even embezzle from the dead are scum. Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

Besides, how can a man's interest in women be called a weakness? It's simply a case of 'the gentleman pursues the fair lady.'

Xu Qi'an recalled a joke he once read: "Even though I drink, smoke, get tattoos, and go to nightclubs, I know I'm a good girl."

Even though I freeload, freeload, and freeload, I know I'm a good man...

About ten minutes later, an official wearing a green robe embroidered with a white pheasant entered the warehouse, followed by the registrar with a hastily bandaged neck and another official in a green robe embroidered with egrets.

In officialdom, you could tell an official's rank by their clothing, allowing one to guess their position. For instance, an official in a green robe embroidered with a white pheasant was of the sixth rank, and in the prefecture government, only the prefect was a proper sixth-rank official.

The saying "recognise the clothes, not the person" originated from the officialdom.

The prefect, a round-faced middle-aged man, warmly approached. Upon reaching Xu Qi'an and the others, he said with a pained expression, "I am ashamed. I failed to manage my subordinates properly, leading to this disgraceful act."

He self-reflects and produced a heavy, bulging package, "Here are one hundred and fifty taels, retrieved from Clerk Zhou's belongings."

This sort of small matter doesn't require the use of qi-watching. A prefect of a state willing to make such concessions is undoubtedly only out of respect for the Inspector General. Xu Qi'an had anticipated this and thus was confident.

If the prefect didn't comply, Xu Qi'an would have gone to Inspector Zhang to complain. However, this scenario was unlikely, as those who thrive in officialdom were usually smart.

So Xu Qi'an accepted the package, weighed it a few times, and refrained from pushing further.

"Prefect, please prepare a carriage for me to transport Zhou Min's belongings back to the inn," Xu Qi'an said.

The prefect first glanced at the Silver Gong, who remained silent, and understood that the Bronze Gong speaking was in charge.

"Certainly, certainly."

Xu Qi'an left two Huben Guards to assist the government office staff in transporting Zhou Min's belongings back to the inn, while they rode out of the city. Accompanying them was a swift bailiff from the government office, also known as a fast hand.

Zhou Min's body was buried in a pauper's graveyard thirty miles outside the city. In this era, a pauper's graveyard was more akin to a public cemetery, with graves closely packed together.

Those buried in the pauper's graveyard were from poor families. Families with better means would hire a feng shui master to choose a burial site.

"Esteemed sirs, Zhou's grave is over there," the fast hand indicated, pointing to a small grave mound under a willow tree.

Several Huben Guards took down the iron shovels hanging from their saddle hooks and began digging into the grave, dirt flying as they worked. With a dull "thud," one of the shovels hit the coffin.

The Huben Guards cleared the dirt from the coffin and pried it open with a creak, releasing a foul stench.

Everyone stepped back a few paces. The martial artists, with their keen senses, found the stench particularly unbearable.

Xu Qi'an took out a porcelain bottle and handed out small pills from it to everyone. These were anti-disease and detoxifying pills given by the Arcanists of the Sitianjian.

He then covered his nose and mouth and approached the coffin.

A male corpse in white lay quietly inside, his iron-blue face facing the sky.

His skin was bluish-black, covered with spots of varying depth, and his face had several rotten holes with maggots wriggling within.

The body was slightly swollen, a result of post-mortem gases accumulating in the tissues. At this stage, the skin would rupture with just a light touch, spraying foul-smelling fluid.

Xu Qi'an had learned about this in theory but was seeing it for the first time.

... My god, I'm going to be sick. Xu Qi'an forced himself to suppress the rising bile and said sternly, "Undress him."

The Huben Guards gave him a resigned look. "Yes, sir."

Half an hour later, Xu Qi'an finished examining the body and preliminarily concluded that he had not died from external forces. He found no fatal wounds on the corpse.

After reburying Zhou Min's grave, the government office clerks led them to a nearby stream to wash up before returning to Baidi City.

The cause of death is more or less confirmed. It was the work of the Church of the Warlock God... Killing in a dream, a method of a fourth-rank sorcerer... If he wanted to kill us, it would be easy, wouldn't it?

The only clue at present is the half jade pendant. But without more information, it's impossible to investigate further...

They returned to the inn around two-thirty in the afternoon. Inspector Zhang, with a group of Bronze and Silver Gongs, was rifling through Zhou Min's belongings, searching for clues.

"We've been at it for an hour. Have you found anything?" Inspector Zhang asked, frowning.

The Nightwatchers shook their heads.

"Wasn't Zhou Min a Nightwatcher informant? Don't you Nightwatchers have contact codes?" Inspector Zhang sternly questioned.

"None that match," a Silver Gong replied sullenly.

"Could it have been taken or destroyed by the killer? All that's left are some useless items," another Silver Gong speculated.

"It's been over half a month. Any clues would be gone by now. How can we solve this case? No one can," a Bronze Gong muttered.

Useless... Inspector Zhang felt a bit irritated. As a Censor, he was not well-versed in criminal cases and had to rely on these Nightwatchers. But while they were good at fighting, they were somewhat inept at investigating.

"Why don't we just have the Arcanist interrogate Yang Chuannan?"

"Bad idea!" Inspector Zhang snorted. "For anyone above fourth rank, an Arcanist's testimony isn't admissible. I know Yang Chuannan is colluding with the bandits, but where's the evidence? How do we convict a second-grade military commander without evidence?"

The Nightwatchers sighed and shook their heads.

"Enough, don't make it hard on them, Inspector. Zhou Min indeed did not use any secret codes," Jiang Lyuzhong said, shaking his head and sensing the difficulty of the situation.

They had initially thought Zhou Min would have left clues using the Nightwatcher codes, guiding them to evidence. But after checking his belongings, they found nothing.

"Perhaps the killer destroyed them," Inspector Zhang said helplessly.

"So what now?" a Silver Gong asked.

"We can only rely on Xu Ningyan," Inspector Zhang said. "He found the flaw in the tax silver case and uncovered the old case of the Princess Consort in the Sangpo case. He might be able to solve Zhou Min's headless case too."

"But how?"

"How would I know?" Inspector Zhang glared at the Bronze Gong who spoke.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an walked in, followed by the accompanying Nightwatchers and Huben Guards.

Inspector Zhang's eyes lit up. "What's the result of the autopsy?"

"It's the same as the autopsy report from the government office. There's nothing new to be found on the body," Xu Qi'an replied.

Inspector Zhang nodded in disappointment and then said, "I heard you injured the government office's clerk?"

"I have restraint; I wouldn't kill anyone," Xu Qi'an pointed to the items. "Any clues?"

The Nightwatchers shook their heads.

“We couldn’t find any secret signals; perhaps they were destroyed,” Jiang Lyuzhong sighed. “Ningyan, we’re counting on you.”

He then looked around at everyone and said sternly, “You all need to learn from him. Watch how he solves the case. Whoever can learn even a fraction of his skills, I’ll make sure to focus on their training.”

These Bronze and Silver Gongs were all under his command.

Jiang Lyuzhong had always wanted Xu Qi’an, but Wei Gong wouldn’t allow it. So he resorted to this method, letting Xu Qi’an train his Nightwatchers.

Xu Qi’an found a place to sit down and didn’t continue examining the belongings. After a moment of thought, he asked, “Are the Nightwatcher codes confidential?”

Jiang Lyuzhong replied, “Silver Gongs and above know them, and Bronze Gongs who have interacted with informants also know them.”

“So, they aren’t confidential enough,” Xu Qi’an poured himself a cup of water and said:

“It’s highly likely that Zhou Min didn’t use the Nightwatcher codes.”

“What makes you think so?” asked a Silver Gong.

Xu Qi’an analysed, “If the codes were highly confidential, the killer wouldn’t have been able to find and destroy the clues among all these belongings. We should have found the code by now. But we haven’t.

“If the codes weren’t highly confidential, Zhou Min, being an experienced informant for twenty years, wouldn’t have used such a crude method. It’s too easily deciphered. So this matter is actually not complicated. The answer is simple: he used another method to hide the evidence.”

The Nightwatchers exchanged silent glances, all somewhat shocked.

“Right, that makes sense. At first, it seemed like we had no leads, but there’s really only one possibility: Zhou Min used another method to hide the evidence.”

The Nightwatchers clapped their hands in excitement, feeling enlightened.

Inspector Zhang nodded slightly, then frowned. “But this leaves us at a loss as to how to find the evidence he hid.”

Xu Qi’an said, “Then let’s start from the beginning to analyse...”

Chapter 197. Solving the Mystery

“Then let’s analyse from the beginning. If you were Zhou Min, how would you handle this matter?” Xu Qi’an looked around at everyone and asked.

“Use the Nightwatcher’s code?”

“Didn’t we just say that the code’s confidentiality level isn’t high enough?”

“If it were me, I would hide it where no one could find it.”

“Nonsense, if no one could find it, what’s the point of hiding the evidence?”

At this point, everyone felt stupefied, and the scene fell into a brief silence.

Xu Qi’an snapped his fingers and looked at the Bronze Gong who had unintentionally revealed the clue. “That’s right, Zhou Min’s purpose in hiding the evidence is for it to be found, to be found by us. Following this line of thought, keep thinking.”

Inspector Zhang clapped his hands, repeatedly praising and somewhat excitedly said:

“That’s the logic. Zhou Min wouldn’t hide the evidence where no one could find it. Therefore, the item with the clue wouldn’t be valuable but very conspicuous.”

Suddenly, everyone’s thinking opened up, feeling like they had touched the door to a new world. They excitedly started brainstorming.

A few minutes later, the Nightwatchers looked at each other in confusion. “But we’ve checked all these items. There’s no code and nothing that fits with the jade pendant.”

The door to the new world suddenly closed again, and they began to doubt everything. So, everyone turned their eyes to Xu Qi’an.

...There are too few clues to start with. However, investigating a case is about finding clues. A good criminal investigator is good at probing from various angles, looking for clues in the details.

And rookies are like children, full of questions... Xu Qi’an ignored the looks from everyone and immersed himself in his own world.

“Any ideas...” A Silver Gong couldn’t help but ask, but before he could finish, Jiang Lyuzhong stopped him.

“Don’t disturb him,” Jiang Lyuzhong said sternly.

Inspector Zhang also gestured for everyone to remain calm. He had placed all his hopes on Xu Qi’an. This young Bronze Gong had proven his worth and ability with his “military successes.”

Inspector Zhang couldn’t help but wonder if Duke Wei had foreseen the changes in Yunzhou when he sent Xu Qi’an here.

Because he foresaw the difficulty of this case... so he sent Xu Qi’an, this genius detective, to assist me... Duke Wei is indeed far-sighted and strategic.

Accordingly, Duke Wei, with his divine foresight, sending Xu Qi’an here, means he must be able to solve the case. Inspector Zhang felt a surge of excitement and a sense of relief, no longer feeling so anxious.

He was originally a Censor, and solving cases was really difficult for him. Fortunately, there was Xu Ningyan....

Xu Qi’an, unaware of Inspector Zhang’s rich inner drama, immersed himself in his own reasoning:

Are there really clues among these belongings? If I were Zhou Min, I would find a way to leave clues for the Nightwatchers... but I wouldn't necessarily leave them among the belongings because that's too easy to destroy; a single fire could turn them to ashes... but it's not an option to leave no clues, so the safest method is to operate on two lines, not putting all the eggs in one basket.

Right!

Two lines of operation. Yang Yingying is Zhou Min's other basket.

Yang Yingying is an unexpected gain, not a clue Zhou Min left for the Nightwatchers. Since no clues were found among Zhou Min's belongings, why not try to break through from Yang Yingying?

Thinking of this, Xu Qi'an felt a sudden sense of clarity and enlightenment.

The Silver Gongs at the Refining Spirit stage keenly noticed Xu Qi'an's shift in mood. They too perked up, ready to ask questions, but then saw his eyes darken again as he fell back into deep thought.

Famed detective Xu Ningyan's reasoning had hit another bottleneck—the clues surrounding Yang Yingying were too few.

It's still the same issue, too few clues. With only half a jade pendant, the most we can guess is that it's some sort of token.... Let's re-examine our thoughts, eliminate Zhou Min's other line, and focus on Yang Yingying's basket....

Suppose Yang Yingying reached Qingzhou, found Ziyang Jushi, and presented the jade pendant, explaining the situation.... Xu Qi'an simulated the process in his mind:

What would Ziyang Jushi do then? He would face the same dilemma I'm facing now: a lack of clues.

In a state of confusion and lacking clues, the first step would be to find more information. How to get information? Of course, by questioning the person who brought the jade pendant.... Yes, yes! That's it, by questioning the person who brought the jade pendant.

"I've got it, I've got it!" Xu Qi'an shouted.

"What have you thought of?" Everyone asked almost in unison.

"No rush," Xu Qi'an instructed, "Summon Yang Yingying, I have something to ask her."

"Quick, go, go!" Inspector Zhang urged.

A Bronze Gong immediately went upstairs and brought down the plump young woman who had been staying in her room since finishing her meal.

Yang Yingying, still in the coarse cloth dress she wore when they first met, curtsied gracefully, "My lord, for what reason do you summon this humble woman?"

Xu Qi'an asked, "When Zhou Min handed you the jade pendant that night, did he say anything else?"

Yang Yingying shook her head, "Besides what this humble woman has already mentioned, Sir Zhou did not give any extra instructions. Otherwise, I would not have forgotten."

She alternated between calling Zhou Min her husband and Sir Zhou, reflecting her deep-seated insecurity. In her heart, she believed Zhou Min was her husband, but without the title, she felt unworthy, leading to her inconsistent addresses.

Xu Qi'an rubbed his teacup. There must be other instructions; otherwise, even Ziyang Jushi, no matter how wise, would be helpless. Zhou Min, being an experienced covert agent, was certainly intelligent... *hmm, perhaps Yang Yingying simply didn't notice.*

"Recite everything Zhou Min said to you that night."

"This..." Yang Yingying hesitated, "How can I remember everything..."

"You don't need to recall every word, just give a general idea." Xu Qi'an reassured her, though inwardly he felt a slight worry. Yang Yingying's lack of memory might be because their conversation that night was just mundane, everyday talk.

Just like walking down a street and seeing a myriad of faces, you wouldn't remember their appearances or even the color of their clothes after turning away.

The more ordinary the conversation, the less likely it would be remembered.

"That night, when Sir Zhou came to see this humble woman, it was like usual. He brought some cosmetics and small gifts, and a pot of wine, a few pounds of pork head meat..."

"While drinking, he complained about matters in the officialdom and the bandit problem in Yunzhou..."

"But since this humble woman is just a woman, I don't enjoy listening to these things, so Sir Zhou didn't say much. Then we played some character riddles..."

"After dinner, while I was serving him, he mentioned that matter and handed me the half jade pendant."

Xu Qi'an had her elucidate on the "officialdom" and "bandit problems," but it turned out those were just Zhou Min's complaints.

"What about the character riddles? What were they?"

Yang Yingying thought for a moment, before softly saying: "Ten mouths feed one heart"

Xu Qi'an had just thought of it when Inspector Zhang snatched the initiative: "Thought!"^[^1]

"Yes," Yang Yingying continued: "In a thousand, lose one, in a hundred, lose one."

Inspector Zhang immediately replied: "Baron."^[^2]

Yang Yingying nodded: "One mouth finishes an entire ox's tail."

Inspector Zhang: "Report."^[^3]

"Inspector sir, well done, well done!" The Nightwatchers and Huben guards cast over admiring gazes.

He wasn't quite sure why, but Inspector Zhang felt a sense of relief and exhilaration. That feeling of being constantly useless finally being dispelled — *This official is also a dragon amongst men, how can one let Xu Ningyan alone take the spotlight* — suddenly arose.

For a scholar, character riddles were one of the most common tricks of the trade.

Xu Qi'an wasn't happy with Inspector Zhang constantly butting in, interrupting his thought process, so he tapped on the table, saying solemnly:

"Inspector General sir, I also have a character riddle, that has been troubling me for a long time."

Inspector Zhang nodded slightly, letting him speak.

Xu Qi'an said: "Miss Wen gets married"

First, Inspector Zhang's brows furrowed, and then furrowed deeper, before his face became stiff, and finally his whole expression turned blank, as he stood there in a daze.

Xu Qi'an nodded in satisfaction, before looking back towards Yang Yingying, indicating that she continue.

"The last two were: 'White jade without blemish', and 'sun and moon together in the sky'. The former is 'Imperial', the latter is 'Bright'."[^4]

Xu Qi'an ordered his colleagues to get some paper for him, and he wrote down: Thought, Baron, Report, Imperial, Bright.

Five great letters.

Jiang Lyuzhong looked them up and down several times: "What could these five characters mean?"

These five words couldn't be connected up in any way that made sense; they were all independent. What did Zhou Min want to say, or was he really just playing character riddles for fun?

Xu Qi'an turned to look at Inspector Zhang, but the inspector was still lost in his own world...

Oh well, these five words don't make another character riddle, so the Inspector General won't be of much use. I guess we'll let him fight with Miss Wen then...

Soon after, Xu Qi'an became lost in his own world too: *Suppose if this was the clue Zhou Min wanted to reveal to Ziyang Jushi, then it wouldn't be too obscure or abstruse, rather it should be something easily found by anyone coming to Yunzhou the first time round.*

What thing can one still easily find on a first visit? To put it another way, what thing does anyone first coming to Yunzhou need...

I've got it!

Xu Qi'an let out a long breath: "I've solved the mystery."

Chapter 198. Another Brainstorming Session

Solved the mystery... he's uncovered it!?!

Everyone present wore expressions of joy, yet found it hard to believe. How had he done it when there seemed to be no clues?

Such a headless case, and he easily solved the mystery. Even though everyone had participated and discussed the case, with the same information and clues, they were all at a loss. How could he have solved it?

Was Xu Ningyan truly this formidable?

Inspector Zhang, who had been obsessively mulling over the "Miss Wen gets married" riddle, trembled and broke free of his restraints. Overjoyed, he grabbed Xu Qi'an's arm. At this moment, old Zhang lost the dignity of an Inspector General, repeatedly asking:

"You solved the mystery? Really, is it true?"

If I say: just kidding... I'd probably get beaten to death... Xu Qi'an stood up and walked outside, saying, "At the very least, we have a major breakthrough."

Under everyone's watchful eyes, he went to the courtyard of the station, took out the geographical map from the horse's saddlebag, and returned to the hall to spread it out on the table.

"The secret of the riddle lies in the geographical map," Xu Qi'an said, pressing the map with both hands and looking around to explain:

"A single jade pendant alone cannot convey information. Zhou Min must have found a way to provide Madam Yingying with more information, but to keep it secret, he used a word riddle. He deceived everyone, including Madam Yingying.

"But with Ziyang Jushi's wisdom, he only needed to ask carefully, and he would definitely uncover the secret of the riddle."

"Why is the riddle's secret in the geographical map?" Zhu Guangxiao asked, frowning.

"Because the map is the easiest thing to obtain, and as a first-time visitor to Yunzhou, Ziyang Jushi would surely get one," Xu Qi'an replied.

Right, the geographical map was available at the post station. As a newcomer, obtaining a map would be a primary choice... Everyone suddenly understood.

"Let's verify whether my reasoning is correct," Xu Qi'an said, looking down at the map. "The five characters in the riddle are thought, duke, report, imperial, bright: Si, Bo, Gao, Huang, Ming."

Everyone crowded around the table, looking at the map with him.

The map covered almost the entire table, encompassing all of Baidi City. Streets, buildings, lakes, bridges, government offices, and more were marked on it.

They recited the five characters while searching for corresponding names.

Song Tingfeng suddenly pointed at a spot: "Siming Bridge!"

Everyone's eyes followed his finger to the location, where the outline of an arch bridge was drawn, labeled in small characters: Siming Bridge.

Another Bronze Gong immediately pointed to another spot: "Here's a Huangbo Street."

The characters “Gao” and “Huang” didn’t correspond to any locations, especially “Imperial, Huang,” which was too taboo to appear on the map.

“The clue is likely in one of these two places,” Xu Qi’an analysed.

“Are the other two characters useless?” someone asked.

“The other characters might be red herrings, mixed in to confuse us. Let’s ignore them for now and focus on searching these two places to see if we find anything,” Xu Qi’an said.

Inspector Zhang selected six Nightwatchers, had them change into plain clothes, and sent them to investigate Huangbo Street. Xu Qi’an took Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng, his close companions, to check out Siming Bridge.

Huangbo Street was neither near nor far from the post station, about a dozen li. Siming Bridge was over twenty li away.

The three rode their horses at a gallop along the wide streets. The pavilions and courtyards along the way had a distinct southern charm, with white walls and black tiles, and loquat trees often planted in the courtyards.

Loquats were one of Yunzhou’s specialties.

Furthermore, the clothing style of the common people here differed greatly from the capital; it was more liberal, with “little yellow people” everywhere.

In the capital, bright yellow fabric was reserved for the royal family, but in Yunzhou, Xu Qi’an saw quite a few pedestrians wearing bright yellow robes.

“Although the customs differ from place to place, isn’t the court’s control over Yunzhou too weak?” Xu Qi’an felt a growing concern.

“The climate here in Yunzhou is really uncomfortable, so damp and cold,” Song Tingfeng remarked with a frown.

“Our capital is better. It’s cold, but not this chilling. Today, when I was seeing off some merchants, I saw pedestrians shivering as they walked,” Zhu Guangxiao added.

“You two are like northern wolves, frozen into huskies in the south,” Xu Qi’an laughed. Of course, as a Refining Qi-level martial artist, he was no longer affected by the weather, so he was merely teasing.

The two looked at him blankly. *What are huskies?*

In truth, in this era, winters in the south were much better than in the north. Poor families would gather straw during winter, and with a shelter to keep out the wind and rain, they could survive the season.

It was different in the north. Many impoverished people who couldn’t afford coal would silently die during winter.

After all, there was no central heating in the northern regions of Feng.

Another point: in the southern winter, riding a horse would make your nose run. In the north, riding a horse in winter would freeze your nose until it was useless.

Half an hour later, they reached their destination.

Siming Bridge spanned a small river and was an arch bridge with two large and two small arches, carved from white marble and covered in moss.

The three carefully inspected the bridge for a long time. Finally, Xu Qi'an's eyes locked onto a protruding brick on the outside of the bridge.

Grasping the brick with two fingers, he slowly pulled it out, extracting the brick, which was the size of a tile, bit by bit.

He reached into the hole left by the brick and felt around for a moment, eventually pulling out a brocade pouch.

Sure enough, it was this brocade pouch that had prevented the brick from fitting perfectly.

"There's actually something here!" Song Tingfeng exclaimed in joy, moving closer and urging, "Open it and see what it is."

Xu Qi'an opened the brocade pouch and found a piece of paper inside. Unfolding it, he saw:

> MO 162

> 347 4 1 2

MO 162. 347, 4, 1, 2... What do these numbers mean... Damn, Zhou Min was really a genius... so elaborate... but he's dead now... Xu Qi'an stared at the note, falling into silence.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao exchanged confused looks. The former asked blankly, "What does it mean?"

"How should I know!" Xu Qi'an retorted irritably, "We're all Nightwatchers, is the gap so huge? Look at Zhou Min, an undercover agent, far better than you two. There's no comparison, no comparison..."

"Undercover agents are top-notch talents, each with their own specialties. Otherwise, how could they carry out covert missions?" Song Tingfeng defended himself, unwilling to accept the criticism, "We Nightwatchers at the constabulary are only responsible for physical force."

Undercover agents were specialised talents with either meticulous minds or exceptional intelligence, while the Nightwatchers at the constabulary are just responsible for brute force. The two roles are different.

At that time, it was getting to dusk.

Xu Qi'an put away the note and said helplessly, "Let's head back first."

Awaiting them... no, awaiting him, would be another brainstorm.

...

The Station

Because Huangbo Street was closer to the station, the Nightwatchers who went to investigate that street had already returned, bringing back disappointing news.

“No discoveries? Did you really investigate thoroughly?” Inspector Zhang questioned.

“That street is almost deserted during the day. We asked the residents of the neighboring street and found out it's a dog market. It only opens at night, and right now, there's no one there,” replied the frustrated Bronze Gong who went to investigate.

A street wasn't large enough to be large, but not small enough to be small. What could they discover by running around like headless chickens? Just ask everyone: “Hey, sorry but do you know the clerk Zhou Min from the Military Commission Office?”

“Ugh!” The Nightwatchers were disheartened and shook their heads.

Inspector Zhang drank some tea, sat for a while, then became restless and started pacing back and forth in the hall.

There were no clues from Huangbo Street, so they could only wait for news from Xu Ningyan's side. If they also found nothing, the case would be back to square one, and they would be at a standstill.

“We must find something; otherwise, it will become a cold case...” Inspector Zhang muttered.

His muttering was heard clearly by several Silver Gongs and Jiang Lyuzhong.

“They're back,” exclaimed a Bronze Gong at the door with delight.

Everyone turned in unison to look at the door, watching Xu Qi'an return with his two colleagues.

“How did it go?” Jiang Lyuzhong hurriedly asked.

Inspector Zhang clenched his fist under his robe, nervously and expectantly staring at them.

Xu Qi'an took out the note and placed it on the table. In an instant, a dozen hands reached out to grab it.

Smack!

Jiang Lyuzhong slapped away all the hands and quickly snatched the note, unfolding it. His brows furrowed as he read it:

“What does this mean?”

Alright, it's not a secret code used by the Nightwatchers... Xu Qi'an concluded.

“Let me see!” Inspector Zhang rushed over, snatched the note from Jiang Lyuzhong, and saw the two sets of numbers written on it:

> MO 162

Inspector Zhang fell into a prolonged state of contemplation, recalling all the classics he had read, and then dismissed the possibility of these numbers referencing literary allusions.

This is just like the "Miss Wen gets married" riddle, another infuriating puzzle... Inspector Zhang was distressed and noticed Xu Qi'an silently heading upstairs.

"Ningyan, where are you going?"

Xu Qi'an turned back on the stairs, looking exhausted, and said, "Going to my room to meditate, or I feel like I might collapse any moment. I- I haven't slept for twelve days."

"!!!" Jiang Lyuzhong's eyebrows twitched fiercely.

He already knew Xu Qi'an was attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit level. Back on the canal, Xu Qi'an had asked similar questions about how to break through to the Refining Spirit level.

Seeing his darkening eye circles over the past few days, Jiang Lyuzhong suspected that Xu Qi'an was indeed trying to break through. He just didn't know how many days Xu Qi'an had been pushing himself.

Twelve days, and he still hadn't reached his limit, even fought a battle in between...

This meant Xu Qi'an's spiritual potential was immense. If he broke through to the Refining Spirit level, his spirit would undergo a full transformation.

Jiang Lyuzhong himself had taken sixteen days to break through to the Refining Spirit level, similar to other Gold Gongs.

"Judging by this kid's state, twelve days clearly isn't his limit. I wonder how long he can hold out," thought Jiang Lyuzhong, then said seriously, "Remember not to fall asleep."

Back in his room, Xu Qi'an took off his shoes, sat cross-legged on the bed, and began to practice breathing exercises and visualising the Giant figure, occasionally switching to the Roaring Golden Lion.

As he was getting into the right state, he suddenly heard a knock on the door.

"What is it?" He opened his eyes.

"Ningyan, are you feeling better?" Inspector Zhang's voice came from the doorway. After Xu Qi'an gave an affirmative answer, Inspector Zhang immediately said, "Come with me to a banquet. Let's meet some officials of Yunzhou."

Chapter 199. Feasts and Loquats

A banquet? Hmm, the local officials in Yunzhou must be aware of Inspector Zhang's presence since he's been in town for so long... Xu Qi'an's spirit lifted slightly. Since he couldn't sleep anyway and staying at the station was boring, he said, "Alright, sir, please wait a moment."

He put on his boots, tied the Bronze Gong to his chest, hung the black-gold long sabre on his waist, and opened the door.

Inspector Zhang was standing outside, wearing a scarlet official robe, with a straight posture and an imposing presence.

They nodded to each other, descended the stairs together, and waited in the hall for a moment before Jiang Lyuzhong walked in from the courtyard and said, "Personnel check complete. Let's go."

A luxurious carriage was parked outside the inn, accompanied by thirty Huben Guard soldiers and seven Nightwatchers. The location of tonight's banquet was a large riverside courtyard.

This mansion, used by the Provincial Administration to entertain officials, was a grand four-courtyard residence.

Tonight, the moon was bright and the stars were sparse, with no wind. Though it was deep winter, it was suitable for holding a banquet in the rear garden. As the centrepiece and guest of the banquet, Inspector Zhang deliberately arrived a quarter of an hour late.

This was both to assert his authority and to give the guests ample time to prepare.

Arriving at the mansion's entrance, they saw various carriages and sedans, ranging from luxurious to simple, representing officials of different ranks.

Led by a servant, Inspector Zhang and his party entered the front hall, where they saw Yunzhou officials in various coloured official robes, over a hundred in total.

Among them was the Yunzhou prefect Xu Qi'an had met earlier that day.

"Inspector Zhang." Amid hearty laughter, an official in a scarlet robe with a long beard came forward.

"Provincial Administrator." Inspector Zhang smiled and cupped his hands.

Provincial Administrator... quite a high-ranking official... Xu Qi'an scrutinized the Yunzhou Provincial Administrator. He had slightly high cheekbones and narrow eyes that turned into slits when he smiled, giving him a shrewd and calculating appearance.

Could he be Song Tingfeng's long-lost father? If I remember correctly, this Provincial Administrator's surname is also Song... Xu Qi'an thought with a smirk.

Administrator Song led Inspector Zhang around to introduce him, with Xu Qi'an memorizing all the officials present.

"This is our Yunzhou Military Commander Yang." Administrator Song brought them before a middle-aged man with a scholarly and military demeanour.

The surrounding chatter quieted significantly as everyone's eyes fell on Inspector Zhang and Commander Yang Chuannan.

The two high-ranking officials sized each other up for a moment, then burst into laughter:

"Commander Yang, it's an honour to meet you."

"The honour's mine, Inspector General Zhang."

The atmosphere instantly lightened, and the officials' faces broke into smiles.

...Why do I have a sense of tension? For a moment, Xu Qi'an thought the scene would become awkward, with veiled sarcasm exchanged, fitting the image of scheming officials.

But the result was so harmonious?

"Inspector Zhang, the banquet is ready. Shall we proceed to the rear courtyard?"
Provincial Administrator Song immediately suggested.

In a province, the highest-ranking offices were the Military Commission, the Provincial Administration, and the Judicial Investigation Office.

Among them, the Judicial Investigation Office was under the Censorate, making the Chief Inspector seem like merely a common henchman before Inspector Zhang.

In the rear courtyard, the officials took their seats. Two interesting episodes occurred at the main table.

The first episode:

Inspector Zhang waved and said, "Ningyan, come sit by me."

The main table had ten seats, each one fixed and specific in official circles. Who could sit there followed strict rules.

Everyone's attention turned to the young man called "Ningyan." He wore a dark uniform with a short cape, a Bronze Gong tied to his chest, and a unique, slender battle sabre at his waist, different from the standard issued ones.

Sharp-eyed officials could tell just by the sabre that this Bronze Gong was no ordinary person.

Many officials took note of Xu Qi'an.

The second episode:

Commander Yang Chuannan stopped an official about to sit down and pointed to the seat beside him, saying, "A friend is coming."

The official was momentarily stunned, then seemed to realize something, smacked his forehead in understanding, and moved to another table without complaint.

...A friend, not a certain high-ranking official, but a friend? Xu Qi'an thought, sitting upright.

"Ningyan, about that riddle we discussed earlier..." Inspector Zhang said quietly.

"Inspector Zhang!" Xu Qi'an replied seriously, "It's actually quite simple. You just need to change your perspective."

"How so?"

"You're just too upright." As a Supervising Censor, Inspector Zhang had a reputation for integrity in the capital's official circles, naturally holding a lofty status.

If it were a more experienced and cunning official, they would have figured it out instantly.

Inspector Zhang was about to speak when he noticed out of the corner of his eye a young female general clad in light armor entering. She had a tall figure, her proportions perfect, and her hair tied up in a high ponytail.

Such a beautiful and dashing female warrior... Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up. Could it be that Yunzhou has such a top-tier beauty among its female soliders?

This outfit was far more enticing than any schoolgirl, black silk, nurse, or flight attendant costume — in a league of its own.

The beautiful female solider walked straight to the main table and sat next to Commander Yang Chuannan.

Inspector Zhang scrutinized her, running through the list of officials in Yunzhou in his mind, but couldn't match her to anyone.

"And this is...?" he asked curiously.

Yang Chuannan laughed and said, "Everyone may not have heard of Lady Flying Swallow. She is Li Miaozhen, a roaming general I hired. Over the past year, she has been eradicating bandits and has achieved numerous merits. If we were to discuss rewards based on merit, I'd have to relinquish my position as Commander."

His words prompted a round of approval and praise for the female general from the officials.

Inspector Zhang merely nodded.

A roving general hired by Yang Chuannan... which means she isn't officially part of the court's military... Xu Qi'an thought as he studied the beautiful female warrior.

Number Two is also in Yunzhou, and she is keen on eradicating bandits and criticizing Emperor Yuanjing... She mentioned she isn't part of the court... I once praised her for her righteous heart, and this dashing young lady is called Lady Flying Swallow... Lady Flying Swallow...

During our conversations on the Grand Canal, Number Two supported Yang Chuannan and seemed close to him... Could she be Number Two? Xu Qi'an sipped his tea without revealing his thoughts.

No rush, I'll slowly find an opportunity to probe.

In the Earth Book chat group, it's now confirmed that Number Five and Number Two are both women. Number Two has impressive looks and the allure of a uniform... I wonder how Number Five looks... a wild girl from the southern border.

Two rows of dancers in colorful clothes with exposed shoulders entered, dancing gracefully to the accompaniment of musicians.

Yunzhou didn't have a Ziyang Jushi, so everyone ignored Xu Qi'an, keeping the conversation focused on the capital and Inspector Zhang. Sigh, official banquets are truly dull and a waste of time.

Li Miaozhen discreetly observed Inspector Zhang's group, focusing mainly on Jiang Lyuzhong, knowing he was a Gold Gong, a fourth-rank martial artist.

What he was skilled in, his personality, she had no idea.

Although he's not young, his vitality seems to be at its peak... She wondered what weapon he was proficient with and what "intent" he had cultivated. *Hmm, I'll ask Number Three after the banquet.*

Li Miaozhen took a sip of wine and then started observing Xu Qi'an: *His aura is restrained, I can't make out his level, but the body of a Copper Skin and Iron Bones martial artist occasionally flickers with divine light, which this person does not have, so he must be at most Refining Spirit...*

His eyes can't hide his fatigue, with swollen eye bags, looking like someone exhausted from indulgence... This person must be either a relative of a significant figure in the Nightwatchers or a relative of Inspector Zhang. I heard Yang Chuannan say that the Censorate is under Wei Yuan, so it makes sense for Inspector Zhang to place his relative in the Nightwatchers...

The banquet proceeded harmoniously towards its end, with servants bringing in plates of dark-colored loquats, plump and large.

Loquats in this season? Xu Qi'an picked up a not-so-fresh loquat, peeled it, tasted it, finding it sweet and sour, quite delicious. Most importantly, it was seedless.

"Inspector Zhang, you must try these loquats from Yunzhou, they are exceptional. They ripen in late spring and early summer, something you won't find so fresh in the capital.

"After they ripen, they are stored in ice cellars, with any spoiled ones removed every ten days. By now, there are very few left." Song Changfu, the Provincial Administrator, enthusiastically grabbed a few and placed them in front of Inspector Zhang.

Inspector Zhang ate one and widened his eyes in surprise, "They are seedless?"

Administrator Song smiled without answering, while the other officials laughed.

Inspector Zhang was quite astonished. This was his first time eating seedless loquats, and the experience was simply too delightful. Incredulous, he remarked:

"To think there are seedless loquats in the world—remarkable, truly remarkable."

If you ever eat seedless watermelons, you'll probably be moved to tears, Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

"Are these seedless loquats a special variety from Yunzhou? How come I've never heard of them before?" Inspector Zhang asked.

"Not at all. It's because the loquat trees have been blessed with the incense aura of Baidi Temple, hence producing seedless loquats," Provincial Administrator Song said with a smile.

"Yes, indeed. It's an auspicious sign for Yunzhou."

"Yunzhou is a land naturally endowed, under the White Emperor's protection, with favourable weather and abundant harvests."

The officials immediately began praising Yunzhou, trying to instil the idea that Yunzhou was a land of auspicious signs, united in their flattery.

Inspector Zhang fell into contemplation. He could sense that there was more to this but couldn't discern the mystery behind the seedless loquats. Cautiously, he refrained from contradicting them.

Administrator Song peeled another loquat and handed it over, smiling as he asked, "Inspector Zhang, don't you agree?"

...Inspector Zhang sighed inwardly, "What you say, Lord Song, is..."

"Lord Song is mistaken," Xu Qi'an suddenly interjected.

Officials at the main table and other tables looked over, staring at Xu Qi'an.

Li Miaozhen, who was quietly eating, felt a bit disdainful. She knew the real reason but chose not to expose Provincial Administrator Song due to her current alliance with Yunzhou's officialdom.

She lifted her head, focusing on Xu Qi'an, curious about what he would say next.

Provincial Administrator Song frowned slightly, looking at the Bronze Gong he had nearly ignored, his smile unwavering. "And what advice might you have, sir?"

Xu Qi'an set down his wine cup, slowly chewed and swallowed his food, then picked up a loquat and smiled:

"The principle is actually simple. During the flowering period of the loquat, if you pluck out the central filament of the flower, the resulting loquat will be seedless.

"Lord Song, am I correct?"

The room fell silent, with Yunzhou officials around the table looking stiffly at him.

Provincial Administrator Song's expression suddenly froze.

Chapter 200. Number Two's Questions

In this era, the method to produce seedless loquats would absolutely be considered a secret technique. However, for Xu Qi'an, who had properly studied middle school biology, this was basic knowledge. He even knew that these poor plants had to rely on bees, the proverbial "neighbours," for pollination to reproduce.

The atmosphere became somewhat tense. Xu Qi'an's words caught the officials off guard and left them in disbelief. They had been astonished and delighted when they first learned about the method to produce seedless loquats.

Who would have thought that a mere Bronze Gong would reveal the secret so plainly?

Li Miaozhen widened her beautiful eyes and started reassessing this little Bronze Gong. She realized she might have been wrong. Although this Bronze Gong might be a lecherous scoundrel drained by alcohol and women, he was not incompetent and had some real skills.

The fact that he was placed at the high table by Inspector Zhang indicates he has at least some skill. Li Miaozhen put aside her contempt and realized she had still underestimated him.

Other Silver Gongs and Bronze Gongs were seated at different tables. Why was this guy sitting beside the Inspector?

This couldn't be explained by mere competence. Were the other Silver Gongs and Bronze Gongs not talented?

"Heh, hoisted by his own petard," Li Miaozen thought with an inward snicker, relishing in schadenfreude at Provincial Administrator Song's discomfort.

Even with Provincial Administrator Song's profound expertise in officialdom, he couldn't help but feel a wave of embarrassment. He had earlier extolled the seedless loquats with lofty talk of the White Emperor's blessings and incense infusions, only to be publicly debunked in front of everyone, including the Inspector.

"Ningyan, this trivial matter would naturally have been explained to me by Provincial Administrator Song. Why did you speak out of turn?" Inspector Zhang scolded.

While outwardly reprimanding Xu Qi'an, he was subtly mocking Administrator Song.

"....What is your esteemed name, sir?" Provincial Administrator Song finally managed to compose himself, asking with an unchanged expression.

"My name is Xu Qi'an, courtesy name Ningyan," Xu Qi'an replied.

"This young man is quite talented," Inspector Zhang said, stroking his beard and smiling at Xu Qi'an.

Indeed, the officials refocused their attention on Xu Qi'an, pondering the identity and status of this Bronze Gong within the Inspector's team.

So, his name is Xu Qi'an... hmm, that name sounds familiar. Li Miaozen thought for a moment and recalled who Xu Qi'an was. She remembered that Number Three had mentioned him before and praised him highly.

So, it's him... If Number Three values him so much, he must be extraordinary.

Provincial Administrator Song managed to steer the conversation away from the embarrassing topic of loquats by introducing the customs and culture of Yunzhou. It was evident he still felt very embarrassed.

As Inspector Zhang drank to a slight buzz, the banquet drew to a close. No one was overly drunk, and there were no inappropriate suggestions to visit the Jiaofangsi, much to Song Tingfeng's disappointment.

High-class banquets like this seldom involved wanton revelry, similar to how high-ranking officials almost never frequented the Jiaofangsi.

When one reaches a certain status, they must maintain their image. Even if they were corrupt, they must present themselves as upright and virtuous.

Take Xu Qi'an, for instance. He could indulge freely now because he was young and held a low position.

But if he ever became highly influential, he would have to pay for everything...

Leaving the mansion, Inspector Zhang and the officials bid farewell outside before boarding the carriage and departing.

After traveling a short distance, Inspector Zhang lifted the curtain of the carriage window and praised, "Ningyan, well done."

Xu Qi'an knew he was referring to the matter of the seedless loquats, so he replied, "It was a minor matter."

Inspector Zhang clicked his tongue twice, speaking more casually as they conversed, "You even know about agriculture?"

Before Xu Qi'an could respond, Jiang Lyuzhong, who was sitting at the front, chimed in with a laugh, "He's even proficient in alchemy, comparable to the White-cloaks of the Sitianjian."

If you take credit for my accomplishments, what's left for me to boast about? Xu Qi'an corrected, "Actually, the White-cloaks of the Sitianjian should call me half their master."

The three of them burst into laughter.

Xu Qi'an took the opportunity to ask, "Why was the Inspector so affable today?"

Inspector Zhang glanced back at the mansion, now out of sight, and said gravely, "In Yunzhou, Provincial Administrator Song holds the most influence, and he does not get along with Yang Chuannan."

Xu Qi'an recalled, "They did seem a bit distant... but Yang Chuannan seems to be distant with everyone."

Inspector Zhang sneered, "That suggests most of Yunzhou's officials are also called Song."

"Please enlighten me, sir."

"Of the three major offices, the Military Commission holds the most power. Yet, it was Provincial Administrator Song who welcomed me. Although it's proper for the Provincial Administrator to appear in such situations, consider this: the first person he introduced to me was the Judicial Commissioner, not the Military Commissioner. Clearly, the two do not get along."

"I also noticed at the banquet that Yang Chuannan mostly remained silent, while Provincial Administrator Song acted like the host. In officialdom, this is quite telling. One must not overstep their bounds," Inspector Zhang explained with a smile, adding, "Ningyan, take note of this."

Why would a martial artist like me need to learn all this? Xu Qi'an silently took note.

"And also, I just figured something out," Inspector Zhang said. "Do you know why that Song gave loquats at the banquet?"

Just showing off innit... Xu Qi'an shook his head. "No idea."

"Anyone curious would ask about it, and by not answering, it's a subtle way of giving me a small challenge," Inspector Zhang sneered. "Moreover, it's a hint that Yunzhou can be peaceful if one person is removed. Just like those loquats."

Who needed to be removed was obvious.

Do officials always have to be so scheming?... Xu Qi'an rubbed his temples in frustration. *Duke Wei was right, I'm not cut out for officialdom. One can only have so much energy—half for Fuxiang and half for cultivation. There's no energy left for navigating the bureaucracy.*

Xu Qi'an's troubled look made Inspector Zhang laugh heartily, feeling suddenly balanced.

"Inspector, how about we guess another riddle?" Xu Qi'an said with a mischievous smile.

Inspector Zhang instinctively wanted to refuse but felt his scholarly dignity was being challenged, so he raised his eyebrows. "Go ahead."

"A woman giving birth—guess the four-character phrase," Xu Qi'an said, smiling.

Inspector Zhang's face gradually stiffened, grew blank, and then filled with impotent rage... before he lowered the carriage curtain.

"Hahaha," Jiang Lyuzhong and Xu Qi'an laughed in unison.

"Hmph!" came the Inspector's cold snort from inside the carriage.

...

On the other side, Commander Yang Chuannan had just entered his carriage when the curtain was lifted again by Li Miaozen, her high ponytail fluttering, full of vigor.

"With everyone watching, aren't you afraid your reputation will suffer by getting into my carriage?" Yang Chuannan frowned.

"People of the Jianghu don't care about such things," Li Miaozen waved her hand dismissively.

"I'm here to ask about the situation. That Inspector seemed quite polite. Maybe he's just going through the motions. Should you spend some money to smooth things over?"

She knew the rules of the Great Feng's bureaucracy: with money, you're friends. Without it, even blood brothers gave no quarter.

"Giving money to a Censor? Are you trying to get me killed faster?" Yang Chuannan shook his head. "But we can have them all killed in Yunzhou."

Li Miaozen rolled her eyes. "What do you think of this Inspector?"

"Mediocre," Yang Chuannan assessed.

"That's good then. The more incompetent he is, the safer you are," Li Miaozen laughed.

"Mediocre doesn't mean inept," Yang Chuannan shook his head. "Those who don't show their claws are the most dangerous. He might be secretly gathering strength to deliver a fatal blow."

After a pause, he added, "That Bronze Gong needs attention."

Already aware of Xu Qi'an's unusual nature, Li Miaozen raised her brows. "What did you notice?"

The wheels clattered as Yang Chuannan lifted the swaying curtain to look at the night outside, pondering. "His sabre is different from other Nightwatchers. But it's still a sabre, not some other weapon.

"As far as I know, Nightwatchers' sabres come from the Sitianjian and are semi-magical artifacts. There's only one explanation: he carries a magical artifact."

Li Miaozen nodded. "And someone who can use a magical artifact must either have an unusual status or a special relationship with the Sitianjian."

"His demeanor is also unusual. Even when he's quiet and seemingly respectful, there's not much genuine respect for either Inspector Zhang or Song Changfu. This could be attributed to the pride of a martial artist, but having such pride at the Refining Qi stage is rare."

As for Jiang Lyuzhong, a fourth-rank Gold Gong, there wasn't much to be said. Caution was warranted.

...

Back at the station, Xu Qi'an, who still needed to pull an all-nighter cultivating, wrote down two sets of codes left by Zhou Min on a sheet of paper.

In the end, it's always me bearing everything alone... The Refining Spirit stage's promotion method would have been extremely popular in my era. Shut-ins would grind endlessly, until their hair fell out, and their girlfriends had psychological trauma... oh, they didn't have girlfriends, so it's fine.

Old Jiang said warriors improve step by step until they become god-like beings... The Refining Vitality and Refining Qi stages are more like the martial arts movies I watched in my previous life, and low-level ones at that... But the stages after Refining Spirit elevate things... Even the Refining Qi stage still requires eating and sleeping. I suspect the Refining Spirit stage allows for long periods without rest... That's already beyond human.

Xu Qi'an's guess was reasonable. Refining Vitality strengthened the body, enabling warriors to engage in high-intensity combat. Refining Spirit tempered the soul, and its promotion method was relentless effort and sleepless nights.

Once successfully advancing to the Refining Spirit stage, both the body and soul could endure high-intensity work without rest.

All cultivation systems, including the martial system, progressed gradually, each rank laying the foundation for the next.

For instance, in the arcanist system, the physician rank laid the groundwork for the ability to observe Qi, which in turn prepared one to become a master of feng-shui, and the enhanced feng-shui became a master of formations.

There was a strong logic to it, giving a sense of realistic, grounded progression rather than mystical fantasy.

His thoughts returned to the case: *The code isn't from the Nightwatcher organization; it must be Zhou Min's creation... That's absurd. Who could guess it? It's like leaving a code saying: 'Withered leaves, budding oranges, pear silk thin, petals falling, sea wings following.'*

No one in the Nine Provinces could match that code.

I've profiled too many times today; my brain cells are exhausted. But I can't sleep, so bored... If Fuxiang were here, we could happily engage in some beneficial exercise... but I might die on her white, smooth belly...

Just then, he felt a sudden palpitation in his heart, nearly causing him to collapse dead right then and there.

Taking a deep breath, he reached under his pillow and pulled out the fragment of the Earth Book, ready to see who was messaging the group at such a late hour. To his surprise, it was:

【TWO: THREE, I have some questions for you. You can name a condition in exchange.】

Number Two, that military girl? I was just looking for a chance to probe... Xu Qi'an replied with a finger as his pen:

【THREE: Let's hear your question first.】