

## Nightwatcher 201

Chapter 201. FOUR: I Have Deduced Who THREE Really Is

【TWO: The Inspector's team arrived in Yunzhou today. I want to know about Jiang Lyuzhong—his "intent," his character, his weaknesses, and so on.】

\*What does this mean...\* Xu Qi'an was shocked. Is Number Two treating Old Jiang as an imaginary enemy? No, a real enemy, and starting to gather information to prepare for battle?

\*Putting aside my good relationship with Old Jiang, even if we weren't close, I couldn't reveal his weaknesses. After all, I'm part of the Inspector's team too.\*

【THREE: Sorry, I can't divulge any information about the Inspector's team.】

After replying, Xu Qi'an's mind wandered, drawing more connections: Number Two gathering information on Jiang Lyuzhong was clearly preparing for a potential future conflict.

\*Was this Number Two's decision or was it supported by Yang Chuannan?\*

\*If it's the latter, it indicates that if things go south, Yang Chuannan might take drastic measures.\*

Number Two was silent for a while, and the chat group fell into an awkward silence.

In this stiff, awkward atmosphere, Number Four, the former scholar turned swordsman, chimed in:

【FOUR: TWO, Yang Chuannan is suspected of colluding with bandits and smuggling military supplies, which amounts to treason. THREE is a scholar, how could he assist you in aiding and abetting? We scholars know right from wrong, minor details from grand principles.】

\*That's right, we scholars have such lofty ambitions...\* Xu Qi'an nodded vigorously, deeply agreeing.

【TWO: Apologies, I was being rash. I have no intention of harming the Inspector's team.】

【THREE: But when you asked that question, you were already preparing for a fight. Number Two, I know you have deep prejudices against the court, but you act too emotionally. Whether Yang Chuannan is guilty or not needs to be investigated.】

【FIVE: That's right, I also think Number Two is too extreme. From your conversation, the Inspector's team just arrived in Yunzhou. They just started investigating, and you're already thinking about attacking them.】

\*... FIVE, you're the least qualified to say that!\* Everyone thought to themselves.

Number Two didn't speak again, seemingly upset, as the members of the Earth Book Society all criticized her and did not support her. Even Number Three, whom she had a good impression of, was clearly taking a stand.

By now, Xu Qi'an could almost confirm that the military lady was Number Two, her handsome yet beautiful face flashing through his mind.

He sighed and wrote a message:

【THREE: Jiang Lyuzhong is a fourth-rank Gold Gong, and his intent is the unarmed fist. As for his character, there are no significant features, so there are no obvious weaknesses.】

These details were superficial and did not involve any confidential information.

Indeed, Jiang Lyuzhong's character had no major flaws. Among the Gold Gongs Xu Qi'an knew, the feminine yet ruthless Nangong Qianrou, the poker-faced Yang Yan, the cold and sharp Zhang Kaitai... compared to these people, Jiang Lyuzhong's character was more moderate, without any obvious traits.

But this also meant he had no significant weaknesses.

【TWO: Thank you. Rest assured, I won't act rashly, nor will I harm the court's Inspector without cause. Um... I have one more question. I want to inquire about someone named Xu Qi'an. THREE, you've mentioned him before.】

\*You even want to inquire about me? Are you planning to confront me?\* Xu Qi'an immediately became wary and didn't reply right away.

As he was about to refuse, Number One, who had been silently lurking, suddenly appeared:

【ONE: I can give you all the information about him, but you need to exchange it with something of equal value.】

An unexpected backstab...

\*Wait, did you get my permission to sell my information? Did I agree to this, and you're selling it openly...\* Xu Qi'an touched the mirror, then withdrew his hand.

\*What should I do? How do I stop this?\*

\*Can I stop Number One? Will they listen? Number One likes to lurk and is quite mysterious. Although I have narrowed down a rough range, it still includes a lot of people.\*

\*And none of these people are ones I can deal with.\*

\*Moreover, what reason do I have to stop it?\* What does Xu Qi'an's business have to do with Number Three? Why should Number Three stop it?

\*Unless I reveal my identity... but... after praising Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an so much, now being exposed so blatantly... I'd be too ashamed to live with myself.\*

After thinking it over, Xu Qi'an decided to wait and see how Number One would respond, and also gauge Number Two's attitude.

If Number Two was only seeking basic information, or if Number One only revealed superficial details, then he wouldn't need to intervene.

【TWO: What do you want in exchange?】

【ONE: You can owe me.】

【TWO: No problem, go ahead. I'll determine the value based on what you reveal.】

【ONE: Xu Qi'an was originally a quick bailiff at the Chang'le County constabulary in the suburbs of the capital. He had a lowly position and no particular significance. Three months ago, his uncle lost tax silver during transport and was sentenced to death by beheading. The emperor, still angry, exiled Xu's entire family to the border.

【But no one expected that three days after the tax silver case broke, the case was solved, and Xu Qi'an was exonerated.】

Upon hearing this, Number Five, the southern barbarian girl, couldn't help but exclaim: 【Lucky him.】

Just as she finished speaking, Number One retorted: 【No, Xu Qi'an solved the tax silver case himself. Using only the case files while imprisoned, he cracked the case that troubled the local office, the Sitianjian, and the Nightwatchers.】

\*He's a talent...\* The members of the Earth Book Society simultaneously had this thought.

\*So that's why he could sit beside Inspector Zhang and why he could immediately see through the secret of the seedless loquats... Despite being a lecher, it's undeniable that he has a strong ability to solve cases... He's come for Yang Chuannan and for the Nightwatcher who died in Yunzhou.\*

Number Two suddenly understood.

【TWO: Got it, thank you for the information.】

【ONE: Heh, do you think his abilities end there?】

\*What does that mean? Does this Bronze Gong named Xu Qi'an have other achievements?\* The members of the Earth Book Society perked up, waiting for a moment, and sure enough, they saw another message from Number One:

【Recently, Number Three kept mentioning the Sangpo case. Do you know who the chief investigator from the Nightwatchers Constabulary was? It was also him.

【Before the Sangpo case, Xu Qi'an participated in a raid on a corrupt official's house. Unhappy with his superior's abuse of the official's family, he angrily cut down a Silver Gong, nearly killing him on the spot. He was then imprisoned and sentenced to be cut in half at the waist.】

Numbers Four and Five were awed.

Number Two's eyes lit up slightly, suddenly developing a great admiration for Xu Qi'an, appreciating his character.

The chivalrous Lady Flying Swallow admired those who drew their swords to help when they saw injustice. Although Xu Qi'an was a court lackey, it didn't diminish his worth.

Number One continued: 【Due to his outstanding case-solving abilities, after the Sangpo case occurred, the emperor ordered him to take on the case, allowing him to redeem himself through merit.

【This man is quick-witted. During the investigation, he also solved the case of Princess Pingyang's disappearance, which you all know about since Number Three mentioned it before. However, the Sangpo case hit a deadlock. If it weren't for you, Number Two, finding the Jinwu Guard Centurion Zhou Chixiong, Xu Qi'an wouldn't have escaped the execution.

【So, you actually did him a favour.】

Seeing this, Xu Qi'an had to step in and say something: 【That's very true, however he doesn't know of your existence, so has only been grateful to me..】

\*How embarrassing...\*

Continuing, Number One recounted how Xu Qi'an exposed the collusion between the Qi clique and the Witch God Sect, supporting the Yunzhou bandits.

\*So it was all because of him...\* Number Two felt extremely conflicted.

By this point, she understood the whole story and realized that the Bronze Gong she met at the banquet was even more impressive than she had anticipated.

He was a formidable character, not to be underestimated.

【ONE: Besides that, Xu Qi'an is proficient in alchemy and has a deep friendship with the white-cloaks of the Sitianjian. Before joining the Nightwatchers, he was imprisoned in the Ministry of Justice's jail due to the revenge of Minister Zhou's son. However, with the help of the white-robed members and the great scholars of the Cloud Deer Academy, he left the Ministry of Justice unscathed.】

\*A deep friendship with the white-robed members of the Sitianjian...\* Number Two recalled Xu Qi'an's unique sabre and nodded slightly, her suspicions confirmed.

【FOUR: Wait, a great scholar from the Cloud Deer Academy intervened to save him?】

\*Number Four's reaction was too sharp...\* Xu Qi'an swallowed nervously, feeling a surge of anxiety that he was about to be exposed.

\*Number One investigated me... This is understandable. During my time in the capital, due to the Sangpo case and the tax silver case, I became a focal point of attention in the capital's officialdom. However, Number One's understanding of me seems to be limited to after I joined the Nightwatchers.\*

Thinking this, Xu Qi'an decided to probe: 【The revenge of Minister Zhou's son... If I remember correctly, the mastermind behind the tax silver case was Minister Zhou. Xu Qi'an was just incredibly lucky, as Minister Zhou's son met retribution for kidnapping a concubine from the Zhang family.】

It's reasonable for the Cloud Deer Academy, which had spies in the Nightwatchers, to know the true mastermind behind the tax silver case.

What Xu Qi'an wanted to test was whether Number One knew about his framing of Zhou Li.

To his disappointment, Number One didn't respond, seemingly accepting the notion of Xu Qi'an being simply lucky.

【ONE: The reason the great scholar from Cloud Deer Academy saved him is twofold: First, Xu Qi'an wrote a poem and gave it to Ziyang Jushi. Second, his cousin is a student of Cloud Deer Academy and has already passed the provincial examination.】

\*Xu Qi'an's cousin is a student of the Cloud Deer Academy and has passed the provincial examination? Xu Qi'an had to take on the Sangpo case to redeem himself, and during that time, Number Three was very invested in the Sangpo case... He even spent hundreds of taels of silver to have Number Two escort Zhou Chixiong to the capital to hand him over to the Academy... What could be the relationship between Number Three and Xu Qi'an? And what about the cousin?\*

Number Four was invigorated, feeling he had discovered a crucial point. He was excited by this revelation and began to actively think, making other connections:

\*During the Sangpo case, sword qi soared into the sky, and Number Three quickly obtained first-hand information... During the ancestor worship, the Nightwatchers were guarding near Sangpo... the Cloud Deer Academy wanted to place spies in the Nightwatchers' office, and if the spy was a family member of the academy's student, trust would be assured...\*

\*Got it, Number Three is that cousin, Xu Qi'an's cousin!\*

Number Four couldn't help but feel elated. With this realization, he knew that come spring, when he went to the capital, he wouldn't be searching aimlessly. He could directly aim to meet Number Three.

\*That cousin!\*

Chapter 202. Seduction

【TWO: Anything else?】

Perhaps because it pertained to Number Three's identity, the members of the Heaven and Earth Society tacitly ignored the crucial information about "the younger cousin being a student of the Cloud Deer Academy."

\*You all staying silent like this is making me feel guilty...\* Xu Qi'an waited a bit, hoping Number Five would "expose" him, thus confirming the attitudes of the Heaven and Earth Society members.

But even Number Five, surprisingly, remained silent.

\*...Well, Number Five is just a child, don't expect too much from her.\*

While Xu Qi'an was pondering, Number One answered Number Two's question:

【ONE: This person is highly trusted and valued by Wei Yuan.】

\*Highly trusted and valued by Wei Yuan...\* This brief sentence caused an uproar among the members of the Heaven and Earth Society. Wei Yuan's name was not only known throughout the Great Feng, but also carried significant weight across Jiuzhou.

Aside from his lack of cultivation, Wei Yuan was considered an all-rounder. Of course, his skills in calligraphy, painting, and other arts were merely embellishments. What made Wei Yuan truly renowned was his unparalleled talent in commanding troops and waging war.

Originally a eunuch in the palace, Wei Yuan was recognized for his exceptional go skills, which won the appreciation of Emperor Yuanjing, leading to his promotion.

In the sixth year of Yuanjing, the old general Dugu, who guarded the northern front, passed away. The three major barbarian tribes gathered an army of sixty thousand to invade the border, ravaging three thousand miles of territory within half a month, leaving devastation and countless corpses in their wake. The court urgently mobilized troops to contain the barbarian forces, but the situation remained dire.

At that time, the future Zhenbei King was a prince just emerging from the masses.

During this critical period, when Emperor Yuanjing was deeply troubled, Wei Yuan volunteered to lead the troops. He vowed that if he couldn't expel the barbarians within three months, he would take his own life as an apology.

The young Emperor Yuanjing, showing great resolve, immediately appointed Wei Yuan as Deputy Minister of War and Left Governor, commanding five armies.

Wei Yuan did not disappoint. Within a month and a half, he had launched such a devastating counterattack that the barbarians were fleeing at the sound of his troops, with only five thousand or so survivors managing to retreat to the north.

This tale of loyalty and prowess was still often recounted with great relish.

Wei Yuan's military achievements did not end there. His most famous feat was the War of Shanhai nineteen years ago. At that time, the Zhenbei King was already a renowned master, yet he still served as Wei Yuan's weapon, driven to slay enemies.

The commander of the three armies remained the fearsome eunuch known throughout the world.

Shanhai Pass, located on the border with the Western Regions, saw the northern barbarians moving south and the southern tribes moving north, clashing with the Great Feng and the Buddhist coalition forces in a fierce battle.

Over half a year, a million lives were lost, marking one of the most brutal wars recorded in history.

Serving as the Left Governor of Great Feng, Wei Yuan once again demonstrated his unparalleled command skills to the world.

"I am so foolish, truly. I still underestimated this Xu Qi'an..."

At this moment, Number Two Li Miaozen had already removed her light armour and was sitting cross-legged on her embroidered bed in a white inner garment, murmuring to herself.

\*...If I am not mistaken, the reason for the surge of pure energy at Cloud Deer Academy lies with Number Three, who is very likely Xu Qi'an's younger cousin... Xu Qi'an himself is highly valued by Wei Yuan... This, this... In a few years, the capital will see the rise of a prominent family...\* Number Four felt a mix of emotions.

Having been away from the capital for many years, there was a sense of melancholy over the changes.

Once everyone had digested this news, Number One continued: 【ONE: His weakness is obvious—he is lustful! This person often frequents the Jiaofangsi in the capital and has had affairs with many Oirans. Number Two, if you want to deal with him, you might as well use a honey trap.】

\*I am not, I am not lustful, don't slander me...\* Xu Qi'an first denied it vehemently, refusing to admit he was a lecher.

Then, feeling slightly guilty, he defended himself in his mind: \*My visits to the Jiaofangsi were not out of lust; I just wanted to flood my brain with dopamine to fill my empty soul.\*

\*Number One is truly hateful, not only selling my information without permission but also tarnishing my character... Hmm, he (or she) is acting a bit out of character, not like usual...\* Xu Qi'an thought, almost penning a defence for "Xu Qi'an," but then realized, Xu Qi'an being a lecher has nothing to do with me as Number Three.

I can still engage in online romances, still flirt with Number Two and Number Five. Of course, Number Two's beauty is already vouched for by me, an experienced veteran from Guangdong B. Worth flirting with. Number Five is yet to be confirmed.

【TWO: Ha, there's no need to probe, I haven't hidden my gender. However, seduction is a viable tactic. I happen to have a stunningly beautiful demon at hand.】

As she transmitted this message, Number Two recalled Xu Qi'an's deep dark circles and, combined with Number One's words, almost certainly confirmed him to be a seasoned lecher.

\*...There is a major flaw in his character. Despite his intelligence, men often let their lower bodies rule over their brains!\* Number Two's lips curled into a smile.

\*...Ha, Number One clearly doesn't understand me.\* Xu Qi'an didn't consider himself a lecher; he just enjoyed sleeping with beautiful women, and he wasn't indulgent.

Just then, Number Four suddenly transmitted a message with a sigh: 【FOUR: Xu Qi'an is a deeply cunning person, adept at hiding his true intentions. A honey trap might not work on him.】

This immediately caught the attention of the Heaven and Earth Society members.

【TWO: How so?】

【FOUR: If what Number One said is true, then despite Xu Qi'an's outstanding abilities, he willingly remained an ordinary bailiff for years, keeping a low profile. It

wasn't until the tax silver case threatened his safety that he acted decisively and efficiently.

【Following that, he joined the Nightwatchers, solving numerous high-profile cases and gaining achievements. His performance was completely different from when he was just a bailiff... Ha, he was probably waiting for this opportunity all along. Joining the Nightwatchers was his stage to showcase his ambitions and rise to prominence.】

\*...So that's how I think? I'm a deeply cunning person? Why didn't I realize it myself? Number Four's interpretation is international-level...\* Xu Qi'an almost covered his face.

【TWO: Makes sense.】

The members all agreed and recognized Number Four's analysis, making Xu Qi'an's image even more vivid and clear in their minds.

【SIX: Xu Qi'an is a good person. As a humble monk, I hope nothing happens to him in Yunzhou. Number Two, please don't harm him or let the Yunzhou Inspector General harm him.】

After a long silence, Number Six suddenly sent a message.

Number Two, who had a decent relationship with Number Six, puzzledly replied:

【TWO: Do you have some connection with him as well?】

【SIX: I met him during the Sangpo case. After he learned about the Welfare House, he lent me over forty taels of silver and promised to give me three cash of silver daily without charge. When he left the capital, he had someone send me twenty taels of silver.】

At this moment, everyone couldn't help but feel the complexity of human nature. Such a person turned out to be a lecher.

【TWO: I understand. I'll do my best to ensure his safety.】

【SIX: Thank you.】

There was silence for a long while, and just when Xu Qi'an thought the ill-mannered group members had gone offline again, Number Five sent a message:

【FIVE: Hey, Number Three, are you still serious about packaging and delivering the Great Feng Princess and the National Teacher?】

"???" Xu Qi'an stared at the message, stunned for a long time, thinking, \*Of course not, can't you tell I was just bragging?\*

【THREE: Heh, talk to me again when I become a top-rank master.】



【FIVE: Hmph, I knew you were lying. My big brother has been pestering me these days, asking for information about the Great Feng's Princess and even questioning who is more beautiful, the Princess or the National Teacher.】

Given that it was this topic, Xu Qi'an was willing to chat a bit longer and sent a message:

【THREE: There are four Princesses in Feng. The eldest, Princess Huaqing, and the second, Princess Lin'an, are top-notch beauties. As for the National Teacher... I don't know. I've only heard her name but haven't seen her in person.】

After some thought, he believed that the students of the Cloud Deer Academy would not have seen National Teacher Luo Yuheng.

【FOUR: The National Teacher is naturally very beautiful. I believe she surpasses the two princesses. Any man who has seen her would be enchanted by her beauty.】

【FIVE: Oh, your Great Feng National Teacher is just a seductive fox.】

【FOUR: Bullshit!】

【FIVE: She *is* a seductive fox.】

【FOUR: ...You might have a point, but it's not because of the National Teacher herself; it's due to the secrets of the Human Sect. I can't say much more.】

【TWO: Ha, what's there to hide? The Human Sect, as the name implies, has a deep connection with the worldly qi of the human realm. When one reaches a certain level of cultivation, they become entangled with the seven emotions and six desires, which is why Luo Yuheng can unconsciously evoke men's desires.

【The previous leader of the Human Sect had the chance to reach first rank. He moved the Lingbao Temple to the capital to use the human realm's qi to achieve this, but the Jianzheng disagreed. Thus, he fell, unable to succeed in his tribulation.

【When it came to his daughter, Luo Yuheng, well Emperor Yuanjing just so happened to be obsessed with cultivation, and she was the definition of femininity. If she were to just practice dual cultivation, given time, reaching first rank wouldn't be difficult.】

【THREE: But I remember Jinlian Daozhang saying that Luo Yuheng did not engage in dual cultivation with Emperor Yuanjing.】

Xu Qi'an wished he could @Daoist Jinlian to verify that Luo Yuheng was still a virgin.

Jinlian Daozhang might have been out hunting rats in the middle of the night, so he didn't respond. Instead, Number Four jumped in to clarify: 【FOUR: Indeed, the

National Teacher has not engaged in dual cultivation with Emperor Yuanjing, for unknown reasons.】

\*Number Four used to be an official and had connections with the National Teacher, so it wasn't surprising he knew this. But how did Number Two know so much?\*

Xu Qi'an hesitated for a long time but didn't ask this question in the group chat.

This matter clearly touched on Number Two's identity, which was a sensitive issue for the members of the Heaven and Earth Society. Number Two might not answer.

Even if she did, she might demand an equal exchange.

Since he was currently in Yunzhou and would inevitably interact with Number Two because of Yang Chuannan's case, he could subtly probe then.

No need to "pay" extra now.

After some thought, Xu Qi'an decided to say something and sent a message:

【THREE: Given Xu Qi'an's intelligence and cunning, even though he's new to Yunzhou, he's likely made significant progress. Number Two, if you plan to use a honey trap, do it quickly.】

This was a friendly reminder out of concern for his fellow group members, not because Xu Qi'an himself was particularly fond of beauty.

Number Two did not respond to him.

The Earth Book chat group fell into a dead silence, and no one continued the conversation.

Xu Qi'an put away the jade mirror, planning to meditate and cultivate to refresh his spirit. He decided to set aside the matter of decoding Zhou Min's legacy for now.

The next morning, Inspector Zhang led Jiang Lyuzhong and a group of Nightwatchers out of the station to investigate the conditions in Yunzhou. Perhaps they would also visit neighbouring prefectures and counties, taking Governor Song with them.

Noticing Xu Qi'an's unmistakable dark circles and the fatigue in his eyes, Inspector Zhang considerately allowed him to stay at the station to rest well but reminded him to work on cracking Zhou Min's clues.

\*Though being treated as a tool isn't pleasant, staying at the posthouse suits me just fine... When a person is extremely exhausted, going out is really annoying... Why haven't I reached my mental limit yet? I just want to sleep...\* Xu Qi'an thought, rubbing his temples while eating breakfast.

Besides him, fewer than five Nightwatchers remained on duty, but thirty Huben Guards were left behind.

Yawning, Song Tingfeng came downstairs, without his bronze gong or standard long sword, and looked around, "Why is it so quiet today? Where is everyone?"

Xu Qi'an, eating his spicy and sour noodles, replied without looking up, "The Inspector went out to investigate the people's conditions, and the others went along."

Song Tingfeng's eyes lit up, "I have a bold idea..."

Xu Qi'an immediately interrupted, "Put away your bold idea. The Inspector has a strict set of punishments."

"Psh, you're no fun!" Song Tingfeng sat down at the table and ordered breakfast, sighing, "It's been half a week since we've been with any women."

"That's you. I haven't been with a woman for eighteen days... I am a bit hungry." Xu Qi'an sighed as well.

"Then eat more," Song Tingfeng glanced at the oily noodles.

\*Old Song still lacks tact..\*. Ignoring him, Xu Qi'an continued to fill his stomach. After a few minutes, Zhu Guangxiao also came downstairs.

"Guangxiao, let's go to Jiaofangsi later," Song Tingfeng suggested to his colleague.

"Alright, alright... Stop pestering me like a little wife. We can wander around the city, but we can't go to Jiaofangsi. rules are rules," Xu Qi'an said irritably.

"Is there any way to circumvent the rules?" Song Tingfeng joked.

"Yes," Xu Qi'an looked at him, "I suggest you resign."

\*Resigning was something he had done in his previous life, but while working at the police bureau, he was quite disciplined. Otherwise, he wouldn't have resigned over a line in Ji Xianlin's diary instead of...\*

After breakfast, the three of them changed into casual clothes and left the posthouse.

...

"See that? The one who looks like he's been drained by debauchery. Your task is to seduce him."

On the street, in a teahouse, standing in a second-floor private room, Li Miaozen, also in inconspicuous casual clothes, looked at the three men leisurely strolling not far away.

Next to her was a seductive woman dressed in an exquisite dress, her hair cascading like a waterfall, adorned with beautiful jewelry.

The woman had a gentle face, delicate skin, eyes as bright as black pearls, and her small mouth was painted with vibrant red lipstick.

She had a graceful figure, exuding charm and allure.

"And after seducing him?" The alluring woman laughed softly, eyeing the "time assassin" as if scrutinizing prey.

"Get close to him, monitor his every move, and subtly probe his findings," Li Miaozen instructed, adding a warning:

"But don't drain his energy. His body is likely severely weakened and can't withstand your extraction."

They weren't worried about the demon's true form being exposed. Coarse martial artists lacked demon-controlling abilities and were insensitive to yin energy. This demon hadn't been exposed when she seduced Zhou Chixiong, a Refining Spirit martial artist in the mountain stronghold.

As long as they didn't show hostility and trigger a Refining Spirit martial artist's spiritual sense, there was no risk of exposure.

"Master, I'll be off then!" The demon smiled charmingly and swayed her hips as she left.

## Chapter 203. Heh, Women

Song Tingfeng bought a few ounces of loquat candy from a street vendor. It was hard, cut into small square pieces, somewhat similar to the cough sweets Xu Qi'an had in his previous life.

You couldn't find such hard candy in the capital. This loquat candy, both soothing for the throat and sweet, was a unique specialty of Yunzhou.

\*Damn, even the candy here is harder than me...\* Song Tingfeng thought as he sucked on one, looking around. He sighed, "It's the same Yunzhou, but Baidi City is so different from other places. Just look at this bustling and beautiful scene; you'd think Yunzhou is truly a place of peace and prosperity."

As they travelled, they passed through various prefectures and counties, witnessing vast stretches of abandoned farmlands and desolate, uninhabited villages. The stark reality of Yunzhou's desolation became clear.

People's lives were hard!

"With such fertile land, there's no worry about food from farming, and living by the mountains supports three generations. Plus, being close to the open sea means abundant salt fields..." Zhu Guangxiao, usually silent, surprisingly spoke at length, feeling frustrated. "Why has it come to this?"

Song Tingfeng and Xu Qi'an shared his sentiment, the latter saying solemnly, "We came to Yunzhou to eradicate deep-rooted problems. Eliminating the Commander who colluded with mountain bandits will greatly reduce Yunzhou's banditry."

"Ningyan is right; we can't get lost in the Jiaofangsi. A real man should serve the country and the people, and make a career... Damn, what a beauty!"

Xu Qi'an and Zhu Guangxiao looked in the same direction, their eyes lighting up. Ahead, by the street, stood a breathtakingly beautiful woman.

She wore a delicately elegant dress, styled in the latest fashion, with a slender waist accentuated by a fine silk belt adorned with blue jade.

Her skin was snow-white and smooth, her eyes bright as lacquer, her red lips striking, and her sharp, pretty face was unparalleled in beauty.

\*Naisu...\* the word flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind.

A beauty with an oval face and big eyes was exactly Xu Qi'an's type. If she had a bit of a fox-like allure, it would be even better. The three most standard oval-faced beauties he had seen were Xu Lingyue, Huaqing, and Number Two.

However, their temperaments were distinctly different: a pure and cute high school girl, a cold and noble strong woman, and a spirited policewoman.

But this chance encounter had the face of a seductive and enchanting woman, looking very flirtatious, which was his ideal goddess.

"Perfect, this is the beauty I've dreamed of..." Xu Qi'an's heart fluttered, feeling like he had finally found love in this lonely world. All those others like Fuxiang, Huaiqing, Lin'an, and the National Teacher were just fleeting distractions.

\*Hmm?\*

He soon realized something was off. No matter how pretty, she shouldn't be overwhelmingly superior to those other beauties. This inconsistency brought Xu Qi'an to his senses.

Immediately, his left thumb warmed slightly. From the jade ring given by Ziyang Jushi, a warm current flowed out, soothing his spirit.

Looking again at that stunning beauty, Xu Qi'an's pupils contracted. What he saw now was not an absolute beauty but a finely crafted paper doll.

The paper doll had the same fashionable hairstyle and wore the same luxurious dress, identical to the seductive beauty.

Its exquisite face was deathly pale, its eyes dull and lifeless.

\*Hiss...\*

Encountering such a strange sight in broad daylight, Xu Qi'an took a sharp breath.

\*This isn't a person, it's a ghost... Caiwei mentioned before that for a ghost to exist for a long time in the world, it must either benefit from local terrain, like the female ghost in the well of my new residence... or be the spirit of a strong person who fell but whose spirit remained, though this has time limits and can't exist indefinitely...\*

Xu Qi'an quickly judged that this female ghost was under someone's control, with a ghost-keeper behind it.

\*This ghost is quite strong to be able to confuse even me... If it weren't for the Confucian righteous energy that wards off all evils, I might have been fooled this time...\* Xu Qi'an discreetly looked away, checking his companions.

He then noticed that they had a problem too, their gazes somewhat vacant, staring dazedly at the ghost. Although they retained some rationality, they were heavily influenced by its charm.

\*...Was I just looking like a lovesick fool?\* Xu Qi'an felt a bit embarrassed.

"Guangxiao, Ningyan, I've started believing in love again," Song Tingfeng said, deeply enchanted by the beauty, "I plan to settle down and start a family. I've even thought of my son's name."

\*That's not love; you're just lusting after her... No, she doesn't even have a body...\* Xu Qi'an thought.

"You're just being lecherous," Zhu Guangxiao retorted, looking conflicted, torn between his childhood sweetheart and this love-at-first-sight beauty.

Such hesitation showed he had the same thought as Song Tingfeng.

At that moment, the stunning woman swayed her slim waist and walked gracefully towards them.

"Are you three gentlemen also out for a stroll?"

She stopped in front of them, her skirt swaying to a halt. She bowed gracefully, saying:

"Alone, I find it rather boring. May I join you three gentlemen?"

\*She's targeting us...\* Xu Qi'an grew wary but feigned a drooling look, hesitatingly frowning,

"We're heading to Jiaofangsi, isn't that inappropriate?"

"Who's going to Jiaofangsi? If you want to go, go by yourself. Song is not that kind of person."

"Ningyan... hey, that's crude."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao silently stepped back, distancing themselves from him.

\*Hmph, this guy is indeed a pervert, speaking so shamelessly about debauchery in broad daylight...\* the demon inwardly scoffed, her smile growing even more enchanting.

\*Perverts are good; Grandma is best at dealing with perverts.\*

\*I have Ziyang Jushi's jade ring for protection and am not afraid of evil spirits. If she makes any wrong moves, I'll strike immediately. With my preparedness, I have a great chance of winning... But it's best to leave her alive for interrogation at night...\* Xu Qi'an's eyes flashed as he reluctantly said:

"If that's the case, then let's go together."

He planned to observe quietly for now. If he remembered correctly, the magical books gifted by the great Confucians included Daoist spells for dealing with ghosts.

\*It seems like you're fishing for me, but actually, I'm the one fishing for you...\*

...

In the teahouse, by the window

Li Miaozen stood, her body partially turned away, using the cloth hanging by the window as cover. She observed the three men in the distance. Seeing how effortlessly her demon had infiltrated the enemy ranks, she nodded in satisfaction.

Of all the methods, beauty was always the most effective weapon against men.

\*Jiang Lyuzhong is out with Inspector Zhang to inspect the people's conditions, accompanied by three white-robed Sitianjian members, and they won't be back today. Without Jiang Lyuzhong at the post station, and without an arcanist to use Qi Observation, my demon won't be discovered.\*

\*Although the demon excels in charm and illusions, she ultimately lacks a physical body and cannot truly engage in intimate acts with men. To maintain a long-term relationship with Xu Qi'an without being discovered, I'll have to hire a girl from the Jiaofangsi...\*

\*Once this is over, I'll send him a few bottles of aphrodisiac pills. So young and already so weak, he really needs to nourish himself... hehe.\*

...

The four of them wandered around Baidi City, fully enjoying the local customs and eating all sorts of delicious foods.

The woman introduced herself as Susu, coming from a merchant family. Her father was a silk merchant, which is why she could afford to wear such beautiful and elaborate dresses.

She admired the three gentlemen for their remarkable appearance and talent and couldn't help but want to associate with them.

\*Is it "associate" or something else... you need to make that clear...\* Xu Qi'an mentally retorted. The key point was, despite such a clumsy excuse, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao believed it. They actually believed it...

\*Hmm, I can't blame them. They've already been dumbed down.\*

In a tea house, in a private room, Song Tingfeng pushed some pastries towards Susu, attentively saying, "Why isn't Miss Susu eating?"

"I am not hungry."

"Why isn't Miss Susu drinking tea?"

"I am not thirsty."

\*Afraid the water will flow out...\* Xu Qi'an thought as he picked up his teacup, smiling, "Miss Susu, entering a tea house without drinking tea, are you looking down on us brothers?"

Susu immediately put on a pitiful expression, "Why would you say that, sir?"

"Ningyan, if Miss Susu doesn't want to drink, don't force her." Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng immediately reprimanded their colleague, standing up for their love interest.

\*Damn it, do you two even remember your surnames anymore... Your lower heads have taken over...\* Xu Qi'an gave up on the idea of using water to reveal the paper doll's true nature.

Susu pursed her lips and asked casually, "From your accents, you gentlemen are not from Yunzhou, are you?"

Song Tingfeng raised his chin, speaking proudly, "We are from the capital."

Susu gasped, covering her mouth in awe, "You gentlemen are from the capital? I've always heard that the capital is the most prosperous city in the world, full of talented people. I've longed to see it."

Xu Qi'an had to admit, in terms of how to flirt with men, this unknown female ghost was the best he had seen. Even Fuxiang was slightly inferior.

She always managed to touch the itch in a man's heart.

\*This is true seduction... Crude seduction uses the body as bait, while the essence of seduction lies in mental stimulation.\*

Zhu Guangxiao boasted, "We are Nightwatchers... Miss Susu, have you heard of Nightwatchers?"

Susu cooperatively shook her head, her clear, innocent eyes blinking.

Song Tingfeng took over the topic, praising the Nightwatcher constabulary. Seeing the admiration in Susu's eyes, he almost couldn't stand straight with pride.

Susu subtly guided the conversation, "What brings you gentlemen, oh no, sirs, to Yunzhou with the Inspector?"

"Of course, we're here to investigate."

"Investigate what?"

Just as Song Tingfeng was about to speak, Xu Qi'an kicked him under the table, making him sober up a bit. He hesitated, "Miss Susu, this matter involves state secrets and cannot be disclosed."

Susu smiled charmingly, "I apologize for my impoliteness."

She admitted her mistake very graciously, without any pretense, making Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao like her even more.

\*These three have quite firm wills, I need to intensify my efforts. If I don't bring back some useful information today, Master will be angry. When Master is angry, he won't give me a man... This Xu Qi'an has the strongest will. Though he often sneaks glances at my body, he is the most clear-headed... Hmm, Master instructed me to seduce him, the other two can be ignored...\*

\*This female ghost is about to reveal her true intentions. No, Tingfeng and Guangxiao can't hold on much longer, I must act early...\*

Each with their ulterior motives, Xu Qi'an and Susu exchanged a smile. Xu Qi'an spoke first, "I need to use the restroom. Tingfeng and Guangxiao, keep Miss Susu company."

Creak... Bang... The door to the private room opened and then closed.

With only three people left in the room, Song Tingfeng said, "Miss Susu...."

Susu's red lips parted slightly, exhaling a breath of insubstantial, unreal Yin energy that scattered on their faces.

Their gazes turned vacant instantly, like puppets.

In his daze, Song Tingfeng saw Zhu Guangxiao also leaving, leaving only him and Susu in the room. At this moment, Miss Susu got up gracefully and started to undress.

Her dress and undergarments were removed piece by piece...

"Miss Susu, please don't do this, I am not that kind of person."

"Miss Susu, let's go to the post..."

The same illusion played out in Zhu Guangxiao's mind. Unlike Song Tingfeng, he wasn't hypocritical. As a straightforward person, he guided Miss Susu to sit on the table...

...

"Hiss!"

Qi ignited the paper. Xu Qi'an tossed the paper ashes into a wine jug, and moments later, the paper was completely burnt. Blue smoke wafted from the jug's spout, and intricate runes appeared on the surface of the roughly-made ceramic jug.



This was a Daoist spirit-sealing talisman, specifically used for capturing ghosts.

To use this talisman, a vessel was needed as a carrier—cups, bottles, pouches, jugs, and jars would all suffice. When the mouth of the vessel was aimed at the malicious spirit, the talisman would activate.

Xu Qi'an hid the jug in his robes and held the jade thumb ring tightly in his palm as he strode back to the private room.

As he approached the door, he heard two heavy breaths—men's breaths. His heart sank, and he had a bad premonition.

\*I still underestimated this female ghost.\*

Inside the private room, Susu seemed to have heard footsteps and called out, "Is that you, Master Xu? I don't know why, but the two gentlemen suddenly had a fit of hysteria. Come quickly and take a look..."

Xu Qi'an, remaining vigilant while acting, "hurriedly" pushed open the door.

Inside, Song Tingfeng was hugging a pillar, crazily thrusting against it; Zhu Guangxiao was gripping the table edge, showcasing his waist strength.

"...", Xu Qi'an was stunned.

At that moment, Susu, who had been lying in ambush by the door, seized the opportunity to blow a gust of Yin energy towards him.

Xu Qi'an felt a moment of haziness, but he quickly regained clarity, as the jade thumb ring in his palm continued to emit a warm force.

He cooperatively made his pupils dilate and pretended to be under the illusion.

"Bang..." The door closed gently, and he heard a soft chuckle.

Susu paced around the private room with graceful steps, laughing softly, "Oh, men!"

She sat on a long bench, crossing her legs. She transformed from a charming and delicate woman into a cold and haughty queen.

Ignoring the two Bronze Gongs immersed in their illusions, she looked at Xu Qi'an, her delicate brows slightly raised, "I have some questions for you. Answer honestly."

Xu Qi'an, with unfocused eyes, nodded obediently like a puppet.

Susu pondered for a moment and then asked, "Is Zhou Min a spy for the Nightwatchers?"

"He is."

\*...This matches what Master said!\* Susu nodded slightly, no longer having doubts. She quickly added, "Tell me all the information you have gathered."

The other Bronze Gong, with vacant eyes, suddenly said, "You're dreaming!"

\*Hmm?\*

Susu was taken aback. Then she saw this Bronze Gong, Xu Qi'an, calmly take a wine jug out from his robes. He opened the lid and aimed the mouth of the jug at her.

"Seal!"

Throughout the process, he maintained his vacant and lost expression, so much so that it wasn't until he took out the wine jug that Susu realized something was amiss.

The next moment, a strong suction enveloped her, pulling her spirit into the jug.

"Heh, women!"

Xu Qi'an's eyes flashed, regaining their brightness. He smiled as he closed the lid.

#### Chapter 204. Interrogation

In the private room, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were still engaged in their "multiplayer exercise," their faces enraptured, unable to extricate themselves.

\*The female ghost's illusion was very powerful; its effects had not yet worn off... I only regret not having a phone on me. Otherwise, I would have recorded their positions—a black history for a lifetime...\*

Xu Qi'an did not disturb his two colleagues' "pleasant dreams." Instead, he ignited a piece of paper inscribed with the qi-watching technique and walked to the window, slowly scanning the street below for suspicious figures.

What he saw was a sea of white auras. In the definition of Qi Observation, white light indicated commoners.

"Whew..." Xu Qi'an exhaled a breath of turbid air, returned to the table, and sat down to drink tea, waiting patiently for the illusion to end.

After about ten minutes, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao suddenly froze, as if time had stopped. Ten seconds later, they collapsed to the ground with a satisfied sigh.

Looking at his two unconscious colleagues, Xu Qi'an had a bold idea.

He carried Song Tingfeng to the neighbouring private room and slapped him twice, "smack, smack!"

Song Tingfeng mumbled in his sleep, "Mmm," and opened his tired eyes.

"Ningyan?" Song Tingfeng was shocked, sitting up suddenly. He looked around, searching for something, "Miss Susu? Where is she?"

"She left!" Xu Qi'an said with "bewilderment," "I came back from the restroom and saw her leaving with a flushed face, limping slightly. Of course, I tried to stop her, but she hurried away and didn't respond to my calls."

"...Find her, I must find her. I want to marry her," Song Tingfeng jumped up, then staggered, feeling dizzy.

The illusion directly affected the soul, and the aftereffects included dizziness.

"Damn it, why am I getting weaker and weaker?" Song Tingfeng pushed Xu Qi'an, "Xu Ningyan, quickly help me find her. She is my unwed wife."

\*Unwed wife? Are you referring to that pillar next door?\* Xu Qi'an coughed and asked, "What happened to you guys?"

This... Although Song Tingfeng was a lecherous person, he was still conservative at heart. Engaging in carnal activities in a teahouse in broad daylight was something he found difficult to admit.

"Don't worry, sit and rest for a while. I'll go outside and look for her. I will definitely bring her back," Xu Qi'an said as he left the private room and turned back to the one next door.

"Smack, smack!"

He slapped Zhu Guangxiao awake.

Zhu Guangxiao's reaction was more intense than Song Tingfeng's. Seeing Xu Qi'an, he looked extremely terrified and instinctively covered his crotch before realizing he was wearing pants.

He looked around in confusion and asked, "Miss Susu? Where is she?"

"She just left. I saw her downstairs, and no matter how I tried to stop her, she insisted on leaving. I asked if you had upset her," Xu Qi'an replied.

Zhu Guangxiao's expression became strange, "Did she look unusual when she left?"

Xu Qi'an "recalled," "Her face was very red, she was sweating slightly, and she was walking with a limp. Maybe she twisted her ankle."

Walking with a limp... Zhu Guangxiao's face turned ashen. "Xu Ningyan, I... I did something wrong. I have no face to return to the capital, nor to face my fiancée."

"What happened? Tell me," Xu Qi'an consoled him.

Zhu Guangxiao recounted the incident with a pale face and deep regret.

"I don't know what happened. My head got hot, and I did something beastly to Miss Susu. I clearly have a fiancée... She... she's still a virgin. What should I do?"

Despite frequently visiting the Jiaofangsi, the women there were different from good, honest women.

\*Hmm, only kids want it all; adults know better. Comrade Guangxiao has a rational mind...\* Xu Qi'an nodded, "You need to think carefully."

Zhu Guangxiao looked up, "You don't seem surprised at all."

\*I'm not surprised. Song Tingfeng next door has the same thoughts...\* Xu Qi'an sighed, "What can we do now? Maybe Susu is just a passing guest in your life."

Zhu Guangxiao looked devastated.

\*...Fuck, it's so hard to hold it in, haha!\* Seeing Zhu Guangxiao so distraught, Xu Qi'an almost covered his mouth to keep from laughing.

If I told them directly that Susu was a female ghost, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao would only feel embarrassed, and after a few angry curses, that would be the end of it.

But now it's different. The more remorseful they act and the more they confess to me, the more ashamed they'll be when they find out the truth later. They'd wish they could roll on the ground in shame.

This idea came to Xu Qi'an from his own occasional fear of his identity being exposed while bragging in the Earth Book chat group.

\*When my identity is eventually exposed and I can't face the world, thinking about comrades Song and Zhu will make me feel much calmer... This is what brotherhood is all about.\*

...

Leaving the teahouse, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were exceptionally silent.

Old Song regretted that just when he had the idea of settling down, it turned out to be nothing but a fleeting romance, leaving him deeply despondent. In his own imagination, he made Miss Susu out to be a peerless woman.

"I must find her and marry her," Song Tingfeng swore silently.

Zhu Guangxiao, on the other hand, was even more melancholy, as he now faced a choice between his childhood sweetheart and the stunning beauty that had fallen into his lap.

Returning to the post station, Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng both chose to take a bath. They didn't ask the attendants to prepare hot water and went straight to the bathhouse at the station.

\*Something feels off... Why is it all in my pants...\* Song Tingfeng thought as he soaked in the cold water, slowly coming to his senses.

\*Miss Susu is as beautiful as a celestial maiden, but I already have a fiancée...\* Zhu Guangxiao was still agonizing over his dilemma.

.....

In his room, Xu Qi'an sat at his desk. Gathering Qi in his fingers, he scraped off a corner of the "Spirit Sealing Talisman." In an instant, a gust of cold wind erupted from the mouth of the wine jug, causing the room's temperature to plummet.

A wisp of green smoke rose gracefully from the mouth of the jug, like an eel with its tail caught, struggling to free itself but unable to pull its tail out of the jug.

Helpless, the green smoke transformed into a stunningly beautiful woman, floating above the jug's mouth, looking pitifully at Xu Qi'an with tearful eyes.

"Master, what did I do wrong for you to treat me this way?"

\*She looks just like a 3D projection..\*. Xu Qi'an slightly raised his head, looking up at the ghost woman.

"Oh, master is peeking under my skirt," the ghost woman said shyly, pressing down her skirt and biting her lip. Her charming face exuded a seductive demeanor that was hard to resist.

\*...Still trying to seduce me? Speaking of which, such a 2D waifu is indeed a blessing for otakus...\* Xu Qi'an snorted, placed the jade ring on the desk, and said, "Miss Susu, keep trying!"

The jade ring emitted a flash of pure light.

The ghost woman looked at the jade ring with suspicion, "Confucian aura?"

After Xu Qi'an nodded in confirmation, she immediately dropped her seductive act and stood gracefully in mid-air, looking down at Xu Qi'an from above, her voice crisp, "Do what you will with me."

Xu Qi'an said, "Fine! I'll throw the ring into the wine jug."

Miss Susu immediately capitulated, "Master, let's discuss this."

\*How sensible...\* Xu Qi'an then put away the jade ring, leaned back in his chair, and asked, "Who sent you?"

Miss Susu put on a fawning expression, "My master is Li Miaozen, the Holy Maiden of the Daoist Heaven Sect. She is nineteen years old and unmarried. She instructed me to seduce you, master, to gather information about the Zhou Min case and ensure it doesn't threaten the Commander-in-Chief Yang Chuannan."

\*There are so many things to rant about, I don't even know where to start... Firstly, this female ghost really was sent by Number Two. At first, I only suspected it. But after she asked about the Zhou Min case at the teahouse, I was almost certain she was from Number Two.\*

\*Number Two is very efficient. She said last night she would seduce me, and today she took action immediately. As expected of a military woman... So this ghost is the "demon"?\*

\*Secondly, Number Two is actually the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect? Well, that makes sense. Among all the major sects, aside from the Church of the Warlock God, the only other one proficient in raising and controlling ghosts is the Daoist sect.\*

He held a slight hope that this ghost was sent by the Church of the Warlock God, but life is never that convenient.

\*Lastly, Number Two's ghost-raising skills are so poor. Is this really raising a ghost? This is raising a double agent. I didn't even have to use the "big stick," and she confessed everything.\*

"You're quite loyal," Xu Qi'an mocked.

"Master, I died young and became a ghost. Naturally, I have to cherish my life," Susu sighed, her lively eyes turning, and she added:

"I was still a virgin when I died, you know."

And so? Because you didn't get to experience a man, you became an enchantress? Xu Qi'an asked further:

"How did the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect become the Lady Flying Swallow and come to Yunzhou to exterminate bandits?"

"The Heaven Sect cultivates the Heavenly Dao. To reach a profound realm, one must transcend emotions. To transcend the world, one must first experience it. To see through worldly affairs, my master was ordered by her teacher to travel the world."

\*And she traveled so much that she became a righteous hero, renowned for her bravery and kindness?\* I wonder if the elders of the Heaven Sect would be so angry they'd spit blood if they knew.

"...Pfft!" Xu Qi'an couldn't hold back and laughed out loud.

He found that Number Two was full of points of contention.

The ghost woman gave him a sulky glance. "Master, is there anything else you want to ask? If not, please release me soon."

"Was Zhou Min killed by Yang Chuannan?"

"I don't know."

"Did Number Two have any involvement in this matter?"

"That, I do know. Definitely not. I've been with my master the entire time."

Susu's words lacked evidence, but Xu Qi'an chose to believe her. From the feedback in the Earth Book chat group, Number Two was a righteous ally with a trustworthy character.

However, whether Commander-in-Chief Yang Chuannan was a good or bad person remained to be seen.

"What's Li Miaozen's cultivation level?"

"Fifth rank."

\*What does Fifth rank in the Daoist sect mean again?\* Xu Qi'an nodded. "She sent you to seduce me. What was the follow-up plan? I mean, the using 'illusions' to deceive me bit."

Susu immediately showed a knowing expression and giggled. "Master, my physical body has long since perished, so I can't physically pleasure you. But I can possess a woman. If you fancy any lady on the street, just say the word, and I will possess her. Hehehe."

"I'm not that kind of person," Xu Qi'an said sternly. "Also, what's her relationship with Yang Chuannan?"

"Several months ago, the Commander and my master worked together to exterminate bandits. They became quite close."

Xu Qi'an, no longer a novice in the officialdom, immediately deduced the true purpose behind Yang Chuannan's bandit extermination – to meet the capital's inspection requirements.

"One last question."

"Please ask, master."

"Are you interested in following me?" Xu Qi'an asked, then added, "Whether we have physical relations or not doesn't matter. Your possession ability is quite useful."

Miss Susu, with her elegant manners, immediately struck a pose, ready for Xu Qi'an to take her as he wished. "I am willing to follow you, master. Please remove the seal."

"Excellent!" Xu Qi'an picked up the lid of the jug. "From now on, you'll stay with me. The wine jug will be your home."

"Master, please remove the seal, master... stinky man, I will drain you dry sooner or later."

As the lid was placed back on the jug, Susu's voice disappeared, and the cold aura in the room dissipated completely.

.....

In the capital, at the Nightwatcher's headquarters.

Under the warm sunshine, Wei Yuan, dressed in blue, was reading memorials at his desk. Six Gold Gongs, including Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai, stood in the room with their heads lowered, not uttering a word.

Without lifting his head, Wei Yuan said faintly, "It seems life in the capital has been too comfortable. Twelve secret reports from the northeast were intercepted by the Church of the Warlock God.

"How have you been training your subordinates? If life in the capital is too idle, the borders could use your help."

Even in a fit of rage, the grand eunuch remained calm and composed, as if nothing in the world could make him lose his cool.

The six Gold Gongs hung their heads in silence, like children who had done something wrong, not daring to argue or speak.

"Thud, thud, thud..."

Footsteps echoed from the stairs as a black-clad official hurried in, holding a letter with both hands. He stopped in front of the desk and bowed, saying, "Duke Wei, an urgent letter from Yunzhou."

The courier system in the Great Feng was well-developed. Besides the usual horses, there was a special beast called the Firefeather Beast from the southern regions. These creatures belonged to the shaman clans, were gentle by nature, and excelled at running.

They could easily cover a thousand miles in a day.

However, due to their poor reproduction rates and high costs of breeding, they were not widespread and were only used for urgent messages.

Wei Yuan used a paper knife to open the letter and read it attentively.

The letter was from Jiang Lyuzhong, informing Wei Yuan that the Inspector's team had reached the border of Yunzhou. It also mentioned that they had recently saved Zhou Min's concubine, Yang Yingying, and obtained a crucial clue.

At the end of the letter, there was an additional note:

"Xu Qi'an is currently attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit stage. His promotion is imminent. However, I discovered that he is simultaneously practicing two different visualization techniques, one provided by the headquarters. Is this something Duke Wei gave him? The other visualization technique is the Buddhist Lion's Roar, and both have been mastered to a proficient level.

"Your subordinate am puzzled. From what I remember, martial artists in the Refining Qi stage find it extremely challenging to practice even one visualization technique due to the limited strength of their primordial spirit and the mental confusion caused by practicing multiple techniques.

"I myself only managed to practice multiple techniques long after entering the Refining Spirit stage. The other Gold Gongs in the headquarters had similar experiences. So why is Xu Qi'an unique in this way, being able to practice two techniques while still in the Refining Qi stage? This is unprecedented and unbelievable. I have not made this public yet."

\*Xu Qi'an is attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit stage... Xu Qi'an is practicing two visualization techniques...\* Wei Yuan, who usually remained unperturbed, had his gaze suddenly freeze.

The six Gold Gongs noticed Wei Yuan's change in expression, raised their heads, and felt a chill run down their spines, sensing a major event was unfolding.

They heard Wei Yuan exhale, a sigh that was part lament, part admiration, and muttered to himself:

"Not even two months..."

## Chapter 205. Echoes of the Inscription

\*Not even two months?\*

The Gold Gongs exchanged silent glances, trying to decipher the deeper meaning behind this phrase – not even two months!

Clearly, this implied some sort of time limit or significant time span.

However, what exactly "not even two months" represented was the crucial question.

The Gold Gongs gestured to one another with their eyes, urging someone else to ask, but they all knew that Duke Wei was currently furious, and no one dared to provoke him. If it were indeed something terrible, wouldn't that just give Duke Wei a channel to vent his anger?

A transfer order to the border would be quite comfortable then...

Wei Yuan recalled his own martial arts cultivation years. Even though he was once hailed by the Jianzheng as the most promising talent of five hundred years, with the greatest hope of reaching first rank, it still took him three and a half months to leap from the Refining Qi stage to the Refining Spirit stage.

Xu Qi'an accomplishing this feat in less than two months meant his talent was even greater than Wei Yuan had anticipated. Wei Yuan had previously admired Xu Qi'an for his character.

Character is also a form of talent.

As for Xu Qi'an's cultivation speed, Wei Yuan had already looked at him with new eyes upon hearing that he had filled his middle \*dantian\* with qi.

He had thought that by late spring next year, this kid would probably be able to advance to the Refining Spirit stage – five months to advance a rank, which was the level of a Gold Gong.

Combined with his naturally suitable heart for the martial path, he might become the second Zhenbei King – a third-rank martial artist.

Who would have thought that Xu Qi'an's talent was even more powerful than he had predicted.

Most importantly, Xu Qi'an unknowingly accomplished something astonishing:

Double visualisation in the Refining Qi stage.



The Buddhist Lion's Roar was a supreme skill, but it required a visualisation technique as a supplement. This visualisation was far inferior to a true visualisation technique, as the Golden Lion's Roar diagram was only an auxiliary to the "Lion's Roar" skill.

It was merely a part, but not the central point of it.

Even so, Xu Qi'an's ability to perform dual visualisation in the Refining Qi stage was still astonishing.

The well-read and knowledgeable Wei Yuan quickly thought of three possibilities:

One: Dual souls in one body.

In the Western Buddhist nations, there were many records of great monks who, after passing away, would revive in the body of a child, not only retaining complete memories but also being naturally proficient in Buddhism.

This was because the monk's remnant soul merged with the newly born child. Such a primordial spirit was inherently stronger than ordinary people, capable of dual visualisation at an early stage, due to their soul being far stronger than average.

Two: A person with great fortune.

Such people were extremely rare, but those with great fortune were always formidable figures, such as the Sect leader of the Daoist sects, the Jianzheng of the Sitianjian, and the Warlock God of the church that bears his name.

Three: Blessings from a high-ranking elder.

There was more nothing to be said about that; he would be set apart from ordinary people to begin with.

"Ahem..." Nangong Qianrou cleared his throat.

He had been pushed forward by the other Gold Gongs as their representative. With Yang Yan absent, only Duke Wei's adopted son was present, and it was assumed Duke Wei wouldn't send his own son to the border.

"Father, is there anything you need me to do?" Nangong Qianrou asked, bracing himself.

Wei Yuan glanced at him, closed the letter, poured himself a cup of tea, and said leisurely, "It's nothing, just a small matter."

\*A small matter? You almost couldn't control your expression just now...\* The Gold Gongs internally retorted.

Then, they noticed a change in Wei Yuan's demeanor. Although he maintained his calm appearance, it had shifted from the calm before the storm to a gentle breeze and warm sunshine.

\*It seemed the letter contained good news...\* What exactly did it say? Nangong Qianrou curiously asked, "Father, what does the letter say?"

Wei Yuan smiled sincerely, "Xu Qi'an is advancing to the Refining Spirit stage. The letter is from Jiang Lyuzhong, sent from the border of Yunzhou. By now, he should have successfully advanced to the Refining Spirit stage."

Wei Yuan did not disclose the double visualisation matter.

\*Impossible...\* Nangong Qianrou almost shouted.

When Xu Qi'an had just joined the Nightwatchers and passed the Conscience Test, he had caught his father's attention. At that time, both he and Yang Yan were present.

It could be said that Nangong Qianrou had watched Xu Qi'an grow, knowing his roots the best.

When this person became a Nightwatcher, he was still at the peak of the Refining Vitality stage, a weak existence that Nangong Qianrou felt he could blow away with a breath.

Although his father had mentioned that this person had great potential, which Nangong Qianrou acknowledged, he still found it hard to accept.

Less than two months, and a ninth-rank Refining Vitality stage had become a seventh-rank Refining Spirit stage. This had already reached the minimum standard for a Silver Gong.

\*If Yang Yan were here, his mouth would probably split open with joy...\* Nangong Qianrou thought sourly.

Similarly, Zhang Kaitai, who had been refining his sword intent, also felt sour. He had once thought of recruiting Xu Qi'an, with plans all set – money and seduction.

But, constrained by his dignity as a Gold Gong, he hadn't dared to implement them.

\*Is Xu Qi'an really this exceptional? Given time, our constabulary might gain another Gold Gong.\*

\*Fortunately, he didn't fall during the incident with that Zhu.\*

The Gold Gongs present couldn't hide their delight amidst their shock.

If the Nightwatchers' constabulary produced another fourth-rank martial artist, their overall influence and strength would reach a new level.

High-ranking martial artists were rare, and those cultivated within one's own faction were even rarer.

Aside from Nangong Qianrou, who was feeling sour, the other Gold Gongs were mostly filled with sighs and emotions.

This was the benefit of having a good character. A person with a stronger moral baseline than most Nightwatchers becoming a high-ranking martial artist was more acceptable to people.

If a sinister person were to advance to a high rank, they would instinctively be wary. But with Xu Qi'an, there was no need for such caution. He was willing to cut down a superior for the sake of an unrelated girl, which, from another perspective, was actually protecting his own moral baseline.

\*If this continues, Father might take him as an adopted son... Yang Yan is a silent type and won't compete with me for favour, but that sly Xu Qi'an...\* Nangong Qianrou thought sourly.

Wei Yuan glanced at the water clock in the corner, waved his hand, and said, "Dismissed. I don't want to see a similar mistake again. Qianrou, prepare the carriage and accompany me to the palace."

In half an hour, there would be a small court meeting.

Emperor Yuanjing did not hold early morning court sessions as it conflicted with his meditation time. He only held small court meetings occasionally, but not frequently.

The last small court meeting was four days ago.

...

The carriage wheels rolled over the stone slab-paved street. Nangong Qianrou pulled the reins hard, and the carriage stopped at the gate of the palace.

He took down the small stool hanging under the carriage board and helped Wei Yuan off the carriage. Nangong Qianrou handed the reins to the Jinwu Guards at the gate and followed the figure in the great blue robe.

In the imperial study, Emperor Yuanjing, whose hair was blackening again, sat on the gilded chair, glanced at his ministers, and said in an emotionless voice:

“We have had the cabinet transcribe the letter from the Yuzhou Government for each and every one of my lords, we would like to know your thoughts.”

The Minister of Revenue stepped forward first and said loudly, "Your Majesty, I believe this is just an isolated case in Yuzhou. Zhang Xingying's claim that there are spies in all the grain transportation offices in the Great Feng is utterly groundless."

The Secretary of the Ministry of Industry echoed, "Zhang Xingying's statement lacks evidence and is unconvincing. We should only investigate the Yuzhou Grain Transportation Office."

Several other officials also stepped forward to agree, making it clear they did not want to investigate the grain transportation offices.

The term "grain transportation" has always been troublesome, involving too many interest groups from the capital to local areas, from the court to the rivers and lakes, with too many people entangled in it.

Emperor Yuanjing looked at the current Prime Minister, "What do you think, Lord Wang?"

The Prime Minister bowed, "Your Majesty, I believe need only thoroughly investigate the grain transportation in Yuzhou."

"Wei Yuan, what is your opinion?" Emperor Yuanjing looked at the man in the dark blue robe.

"I agree with the Prime Minister," Wei Yuan replied.

The officials withdrew their gaze from Wei Yuan.

Prime Minister Wang glanced at Wei Yuan, feeling a mix of tacit understanding and disappointment. During this critical period of official evaluation, anyone who proposed a thorough investigation of the grain transportation offices would be committing political suicide.

Neither of the two old rivals would make such a basic mistake, but both hoped the other would.

Emperor Yuanjing nodded, his expression deep and unreadable. He continued:

“The Administration in Qingzhou sent back a letter. Yang Gong has erected admonitory stele in all the major offices in Qingzhou. The inscription reads: '\*Your

food and your money, flesh and blood of the people. The people are easy to abuse, the heavens are hard to cheat.\*'

"The Administration in Qingzhou believes this poem is a powerful warning to officials and suggests that the court order all provinces to follow suit and erect similar admonitory tablets.

"What do my lords think?"

In the imperial study, the officials stirred, murmuring among themselves.

"What a splendid poem, what a splendid poem!" An enthusiastic censor stepped forward and exclaimed, "This poem is simply a stroke of genius, beyond words. This is the kind of poem that represents the grandeur of the Great Feng, not some 'subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.' or 'His dream laden boat sailing atop the Milky way.'

"Your servant filled with fervour and respectfully request that Your Majesty order the various provinces to follow suit and erect admonitory stele in all major offices."

This proposal was met with widespread support from the officials present. It did not involve any interest disputes or factional conflicts, making the officials more willing to speak up and express their opinions freely.

However, not everyone agreed. Some were reluctant to see Yang Gong gain fame, especially since this Administrator of Qingzhou was a scholar from the Cloud Deer Academy.

But more people hoped the court would proceed with this. Such an action, when the news spread, would greatly enhance the court's image in the eyes of the people, garnering much positive sentiment.

This aligned with the scholars' penchant for reputation.

In recent years, there had been relentless criticism from the populace, from commoners to the gentry. Erecting admonitory stele could help restore some of the court's reputation.

Prime Minister Wang stepped forward, "I propose we follow the example of the Qingzhou Administration Commission."

Emperor Yuanjing shared this sentiment. Although he practiced cultivation, neglected governance, and amassed wealth without restraint, he considered himself a good emperor.

"Yang Gong's reputation as a great scholar is well-deserved. This poem, created during my reign, will be recorded in history. Not only will I order the erection of admonitory tablets in provincial offices, but I will also personally inscribe it and have it reproduced from my handwriting," Emperor Yuanjing said with a smile.

"Yang Gong was a top scholar in his year during the imperial examination, excelling in poetry," Prime Minister Wang added with a smile.

Only Wei Yuan seemed puzzled for a moment.

\*‘Your food and your money, flesh and blood of the people. The people are easy to abuse, the heavens are hard to cheat.’... Wasn’t this the poem Xu Qi'an wrote during his trial at the Conscience Test?\*

\*How did it become attributed to Yang Gong?\*

\*Or perhaps, was it originally Yang Gong’s poem, and Xu Qi'an learned it from his cousin Xu Xinnian?\*

Wei Yuan quickly dismissed this notion. In terms of poetic talent, a hundred Yang Gongs couldn’t match one Xu Qi'an.

This poem had only recently appeared. The inspector’s team traveled south and would have passed through Qingzhou. This means Xu Qi'an returned to Qingzhou, and the poem originated there.

Understanding this, Wei Yuan frowned, puzzled, \*This poem was written by Xu Qi'an. Why did His Majesty overlook it just now? Was it intentional, or did the Qingzhou Administration deliberately omit Xu Qi'an’s name?\*

\*The memorial was sent back to the capital by the Qingzhou Administration. Such documents are usually drafted by clerks since the Administrator couldn’t attend to everything personally. It’s possible a clerk, trying to curry favor with the Administrator, deliberately omitted the original author’s name... Later, they could easily claim it was a drafting oversight.\*

\*Once this matter is settled, Yang Gong’s fame will spread with this poem. Even if Yang Gong clarifies later, whether the correction reaches everyone and its impact remain uncertain.\*

\*The literary reputation rightfully belonging to Xu Qi'an can’t be taken away... He’s too conspicuous, still too young.\* Wei Yuan sighed inwardly, stepped forward, and said loudly:

“Your Majesty, your servant has a point of order!”

Chapter 206. Scoundrel

Emperor Yuanjing looked at Wei Yuan and nodded, "What is it?"

Wei Yuan asked, "In the letter sent back by the Qingzhou Administration, does it explicitly state that this poem was written by Administrator Yang Gong?"

\*... What does he mean by that?\* The seasoned officials detected something amiss.

The Emperor did not answer directly but instead asked, "Is there a problem?"

The letter did not explicitly state that the poem was written by Yang Gong. The wording was as follows: "Administrator Yang ordered the Qingzhou officials to erect admonitory stele and inscribe the poem to warn the people."

This was a clever phrasing—neither confirming nor denying it. To Emperor Yuanjing, this was tantamount to acknowledgment.

"This poem was not written by Yang Gong but by another person. Your servant believes that once it spreads, it will become renowned across the land. Such an opportunity for fame should not be monopolised by Yang Gong," Wei Yuan said.

"Oh? Since when did Qingzhou produce such a great talent?" Emperor Yuanjing smiled with interest and stared at Wei Yuan. "But how did you come to know this?"

\*Not written by Yang Gong, but by someone else... Qingzhou indeed produces many talented individuals, being a major province for the imperial examinations...\* the officials pondered, casting curious glances at Wei Yuan following the Emperor's question.

They were all wondering how Wei Yuan knew that the poem was not written by Yang Gong.

"Nor is the author a person from Qingzhou," Wei Yuan shook his head.

The Emperor responded with a questioning "Hmm?"

"Moreover, I know that this poem was not written in Qingzhou but came into existence more than a month ago. And it was not written by a Qingzhou native," Wei Yuan continued.

At this, the officials echoed the Emperor's "Hmm?" in puzzlement, and the censor who had praised the poem earlier questioned:

"Lord Wei, please do not keep us in suspense before His Majesty."

A veteran of the court, starting with a pointed comment.

\*Written more than a month ago... not by a Qingzhou native...\* the more perceptive officials began to form guesses.

A moment later, strange expressions began to form on their faces.

Wei Yuan glanced at Emperor Yuanjing, whose face had darkened, and spoke calmly, "This poem was written by Xu Qi'an, a Bronze Gong of the Nightwatchers. The original still hangs in our constabulary. If the officials wish to view it, I can arrange for it to be borrowed."

\*So it was him...\* murmurs of discussion erupted again:

"This young man has great talent; it's a pity he isn't as scholar."

"Hmph, that Xu Pingzhi is just a coarse martial man with no foresight."

"If only Xu Qi'an could enter the Imperial Academy, how wonderful it would be!"

Even those officials who disliked Xu Qi'an couldn't help but sigh in regret. Such poetic talent, if only he were a scholar—of course, a scholar of the Imperial Academy—how wonderful it would be.

No one doubted Wei Yuan's words, not even his political enemies. Wei Yuan had no reason to lie about this matter, which would only harm his own reputation.

The censor looked embarrassed and lowered his head, staying quiet.

Emperor Yuanjing snorted, "Why bring this up?"

Wei Yuan chuckled, "Naturally, to help my subordinate gain fame."

The Emperor snorted coldly but said nothing more.

Although he did not like Xu Qi'an, as the supreme ruler, he would not hold a grudge against a lowly Bronze Gong. Besides, there were many people in the court he disliked.

Of course, if the Bronze Gong made a mistake or angered him, that would be a different story.

...

Qingyun Mountain, Cloud Deer Academy.

A wild crane flew from the horizon, its wings flapping as it swooped down toward Qingyun Mountain, skimming over courtyards and pavilions before being caught in a lookout hall on the second floor of an elegant pavilion at the edge of a cliff.

In a distortion of clear light, the crane transformed into an intricately crafted paper crane, lifelike in its detail.

"Yang Ziqian has sent a letter back," Li Mubai said with a smile, turning to inform the two great scholars engrossed in their game, two terrible players.

Zhang Shen and Chen Tai were absorbed in their intense match and did not look up. One casually asked, "What does it say?"

Li Mubai unfolded the letter, smiling as he read. However, his smile gradually faded, his expression growing twisted.

"Shameless, simply shameless!" Li Mubai suddenly crumpled the letter in his hand and roared:

"Old scoundrel Yang Gong, shameless and disgraceful. I, Li Mubai, am ashamed of him, ashamed!"

The sudden outburst startled the two great scholars, Zhang Shen and Chen Tai.

"What is it this time? How could Ziqian's letter provoke such anger?" Zhang Shen shook his head helplessly, mocking:

"Purejing, you have a short temper, prone to anger. That's why you lost to Wei Yuan back then. Look at Wei Yuan, calm and unyielding like a mountain."

Great scholar Chen Tai nodded, "Chunjing does have a tendency towards impulsiveness. Let me see the letter."

Li Mubai was already beside himself with anger, filled with jealousy, and snorted, throwing the letter onto the chessboard.

Zhang Shen picked it up, reading intently. In the letter, Yang Gong, or Yang Ziqian, mentioned meeting the inspection team in Qingzhou and encountering Xu Qi'an.

Yang Gong lavishly praised Xu Qi'an, calling him the greatest poet of Feng in over five hundred years. As Zhang Shen read further, he sensed something was off, as if Yang Gong were boasting and ingratiating himself.

Further down was a poem:

"\*Your food and your money,  
flesh and blood of the people.

The people are easy to abuse,  
the heavens are hard to cheat.

—Xu Qi'an (taught by Yang Gong)."

The letter stated that this was taken from an inscribed tablet.

Crash... The cliffside shook violently, stones rolling down, as clear light fluctuated within the pavilion. The roaring voices of Zhang Shen and Chen Tai echoed throughout Cloud Deer Academy.

"Yang Gong, that old scoundrel, is unworthy of being a teacher. I suggest we expel him from the Academy."

"It's one thing to take credit for a farewell poem, but this too? I won't stand for it!"

"This is infuriating, it's so infuriating! He's even written a letter just to boast..."

...

After enjoying a Yunzhou lunch at the station, Xu Qi'an took a cold bath, feeling refreshed.

He returned to his room in white inner garments and lifted the lid of his pot. A wisp of green smoke emerged, transforming into a stunningly beautiful woman who pouted:

"You damned man!"

Xu Qi'an sighed, "I was going to let you go, but now I've changed my mind."

Su Su immediately altered her attitude, coquettishly pleading, "Master~"

Xu Qi'an narrowed his eyes, scrutinising her.

"Master, what are you looking at?" Su Su blinked her eyes, adopting a seductive pose.

"I'm wondering how Ning Caichen managed it," Xu Qi'an said bluntly.

"Who's Ning Caichen?"

"A scholar who also fell in love with a spirit."

"That spirit must have been after his vitality," Su Su pouted indignantly.

"Why?"

"Because I'm a spirit, and I crave men's vitality."

"How do you crave it?" Xu Qi'an asked, narrowing his eyes and speaking in a low tone. "Confess honestly, and I'll decide whether to release you based on the severity of your sins."

"By sucking," Su Su said with a feigned innocence. "But I only suck the vitality of wicked bandits, never the innocent."

"Suck where? I'm just curious about a spirit's methods."

"From the head."

"Which head?" Xu Qi'an's eyes flashed sharply.

Su Su looked confused, but still innocently pointed to her forehead with her slender finger, "Here."

The sharp light in Xu Qi'an's eyes immediately dimmed. He said solemnly, "I've thought it over. You have committed many evils. I can't let you go easily. Back to the pot you go."

Bang!

He covered the pot.



"What a waste of time..." Xu Qi'an muttered, standing up and leaving the room to knock on Song Tingfeng's door.

"What is it?" Song Tingfeng, who had planned to take a nap and was already undressed, asked as he opened the door.

"The Inspector is not here, but we cannot slack off. I intend to try and decipher the code left by Zhou Min. You and Guangxiao are experienced Nightwatchers, and your insights could be invaluable to my deductions."

Song Tingfeng felt both honored and ashamed hearing this from the famed detective Xu Ningyan, knowing that most Nightwatchers, including himself, were more about brute force than reasoning.

"Ningyan, I'm actually not skilled in solving cases."

"Have you heard this saying?" Xu Qi'an said seriously.

Song Tingfeng shook his head.

Xu Qi'an said, "Some casual words can clear my doubts, and a sudden impulse can drive me to continue. I pay close attention to your every move."

Song Tingfeng looked wary, "Why are you paying attention to my every move? What are you planning?"

"No, that just slipped out..."

Xu Qi'an changed the subject, "By the way, what are your thoughts on Su Su?"

As he spoke, he stared intently at Song Tingfeng, hoping to see a reaction of shame.

Song Tingfeng felt a pang in his heart at the mention of Su Su and said solemnly, "It will be my lifelong regret if I can't find her."

\*She's in my room... Hasn't he figured it out yet? This doesn't make sense. As soon as he and Zhu Guangxiao compare notes, Su Su's antics should be exposed... Are they keeping it from each other? Why?\*

\*Is it because I'm more trustworthy?\*

 Xu Qi'an felt a sudden surge of emotion.

"By the way, don't tell anyone about Su Su, not even Guangxiao," Song Tingfeng cautioned.

"Don't worry, I'm very discreet," Xu Qi'an said with a bright smile, then asked, "By the way, is it because I'm more trustworthy than Guangxiao?"

"No, why would you think that?" Song Tingfeng gave him a puzzled look. "It's because you have no boundaries when it comes to matters between men and women. I'm not afraid of you knowing. You can't be worse than you already are."

\*...Why am I considered more shameless just because we all went to Jiaofangsi and I slept with Fuxiang while you slept with someone less attractive?\*

 Xu Qi'an protested inwardly, thinking, I neither engage with young girls nor have a mother complex, how am I the one without boundaries?

"Every time other colleagues talk about how you sleep with Fuxiang every night without paying, everyone curses you: 'Damn scoundrel!'"

"..."

The two knocked on Zhu Guangxiao's door together. Song Tingfeng frowned, "What's wrong with you? You've been off since earlier."

Zhu Guangxiao opened his mouth as if to speak but hesitated, finally looking at Xu Qi'an.

\*Why are you looking at me? Do you also think I'm a scoundrel?\* Xu Qi'an rolled his eyes in irritation.

The three of them went together to the room where Zhou Min's belongings were stored and carefully examined everything for a long time. Song Tingfeng eventually gave up, saying, "We've gone through these items countless times."

Zhu Guangxiao looked at Xu Qi'an, "Ningyan, do you think there's a clue related to the code in his belongings?"

"Remember how I cracked the word puzzle to find the code?" Xu Qi'an began pacing around the room, carefully explaining his reasoning:

"Thinking from different perspectives is an essential part of deduction. Zhou Min's case is different from the Sangpo case. At least with Sangpo, there were traces to follow, and we could piece things together.

"But in this case, there are no other clues. The only lead we have is deciphering the code left by Zhou Min."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao nodded slightly, lost in thought.

Having experienced the Sangpo case, they had gained some insights into solving cases but were still in the stage of imitating what they had seen. If a case similar to Sangpo arose again, they could mimic Xu Qi'an's methods to try and solve it.

However, if the entry point of the case changed, they would be at a loss.

In terms of martial arts novels, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were still at the stage of practicing sword techniques, while Xu Qi'an had reached the level of winning without a move, holding an invisible sword in his heart.

"Don't just nod. Tell me your thoughts."

Song Tingfeng hesitated, "Leaving a code is for us to decipher. So, the clue should be in a very obvious place, easy to find, but it depends on whether we can discover it?"

"Very good, blind monk, you've found the key point." Xu Qi'an teased.

Then, he unfolded the slip of paper, looking at the two sets of codes, and said, "These are two sets of numbers. When numbers are used as codes, they must correspond to a cipher book. If we find the cipher book, we can decode the message."

Because a simple string or a few strings of numbers were meaningless in themselves, the meaning lies in what the numbers refer to.

There must be a cipher book.

"Except for the word 'Mo' [silent], the rest are numbers. The clue won't be in the map again, so where can we find a lot of numbers?" Zhu Guangxiao wondered.

"There are many clues containing numbers, aren't there numbers in books?" Song Tingfeng said.

"Good, very good guess." Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up. "Let's assume these two sets of codes are in a book. Following our previous logic, what books are the easiest for us to obtain?"

Song Tingfeng, feeling his suggestion was accepted, analyzed with renewed vigor, "The Three Character Classic, Records of the Great Feng, the Yunzhou Chronicles?"

These were all books readily available in Yunzhou. The Three Character Classic was a beginner's textbook, each prefecture has a copy of the Records of the Great Feng, and the Yunzhou Chronicles were the historical records of Yunzhou, commonly found in the constabulary and even at post stations.

They had the station attendants fetch these books but didn't immediately start flipping through them because there was another issue to resolve.

Zhu Guangxiao asked, "So what do the numbers represent, and how do we find them?"

"After losing a lot of protein, a man's brain can temporarily malfunction." Xu Qi'an looked at him seriously, "At such times, you need rest or a supplement."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, these numbers either represent page numbers or refer to specific characters. This is the simplest deduction." Xu Qi'an explained.

Song Tingfeng opened the Three Character Classic, "It's definitely not page numbers because the Three Character Classic is so thin."

He said as he flipped through the Three Character Classic, "The one hundred sixty-second character is 'Yi' [Righteousness], and the three hundred forty-seventh character is 'Qing' [Emotion].

"The other codes also decipher to: Silent man, human nature... Okay, this is incorrect."

As Song Tingfeng's attempt failed, Xu Qi'an and Zhu Guangxiao were also decoding the other two books.

Zhu Guangxiao said, "Silent flowers, deep water east... Okay, this is wrong too."

The two looked at Xu Qi'an, who dejectedly said, "Don't freeload again..."

Chapter 207. The Princesses Should've Received my Love Texts Now

Subsequently, they searched through many commonly found books using the same method to decode the ciphers, but all attempts ended in failure.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were somewhat discouraged. The former squinted his eyes and said, "Ningyan, you seem to have lost your cleverness."

It was clear that Xu Qi'an's mental sharpness had significantly declined; he was not as keen as usual.

Xu Qi'an raised his head, staring blankly at the interwoven beams above, and said irritably, "When your friend was feeling unwell, didn't they also lack energy?"

"Wh-why bring up my friend..." Song Tingfeng felt a bit embarrassed.

\*Hehe,\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself, \*I haven't slept for thirteen days, and you expect my brain to work fast? Susu, that useless creature, can't even help me stay alert. What's the use of keeping her?\*

However, this kind of demon's value isn't in her core, but in her outward appearance.

Keeping a demon is like owning a fish pond, much easier and more pleasant than painstakingly managing all the backups like Huaiqing, Lin'an, Fuxiang, and Caiwei.

Eventually, the pond owner Xu Qi'an would hold a trident, and swiftly spear whichever fish he fancied.

"How about taking a break?" Song Tingfeng suggested.

"Let the attendants bring some sweets," Xu Qi'an said.

The best way to combat brain fatigue was to consume sugar. Sugar was the only energy source the brain can use. Most people enjoy sweets not because they taste so good, but because the brain prompts the body to intake sugar.

Xu Qi'an needed sugar badly right now.

The attendants prepared sweet dishes for them: longan egg soup, raisin cakes, almond tofu pudding... all sweet treats.

Xu Qi'an picked the longan egg soup, offering the almond tofu pudding to the squinting Song Tingfeng, who immediately brightened up, laughing, "Ningyan, how did you know I like sweet tofu pudding?"

\*Because you look like a heretic...\* Xu Qi'an chuckled, "Because we're brothers. Seeing you so miserable, I wanted to give you something sweet to cheer you up."

\*Who was miserable?\* Song Tingfeng rolled his eyes, knowing Xu Qi'an was alluding to the incident with Susu.

\*Speaking of which, Susu is truly wonderful, a rare woman who can match me in bed for three hundred rounds...\* Song Tingfeng thought of today's encounter in the teahouse private room, feeling a twinge of longing.

"You wouldn't understand; you're a playboy, but I'm not anymore." Song Tingfeng shook his head, sneering:

"When you first joined the Nightwatchers, I advised you to marry Captain Lyu Qing, but you hesitated and then started seeing Fuxiang. I knew then you were the same as me. If Captain Lyu married you, it would be a flower stuck in cow dung."

Xu Qi'an thought of the valiant Captain Lyu Qing and retorted, "Though Captain Lu isn't as pretty as Fuxiang, calling her cow dung is too much."

"I didn't call her cow dung; I was referring to you."

"Then why the flower stuck in cow dung analogy?"

"..."

After finishing the sweets, due to Detective Xu Ningyan's poor state, Song Tingfeng took on the burden of deduction, clearing his throat:

"Let's think from a different perspective. If I were Zhou Min, I'd hide the cipher book in a place where the Inspector's team could easily find it but wouldn't attract attention."

"Mm!" Xu Qi'an nodded.

"We've already checked Zhou Min's residence; there are no secret compartments or suspicious items. We've also compared the books he left behind," Zhu Guangxiao said.

Song Tingfeng pondered, rubbing his chin, "Maybe it isn't necessarily a book? Zhou Min was meticulous. He'd think of things others could think of.

"Let's consider another possibility. Could it be something with writing that's not a book? Ningyan, do you think this is possible?"

"Very good, Tingfeng, your intelligence has successfully caught my attention. You're a genius wasted by the women of the Jiaofangsi," Xu Qi'an praised, then asked:

"So, what do you think it could be? It's not a book but is among Zhou Min's belongings. And it must be quite thick..."

Xu Qi'an suddenly stopped.

"A calendar?!" Song Tingfeng exclaimed first.

The diligent Zhu Guangxiao accurately found a thick calendar among the belongings. "Is it this?"

"That's it!" Xu Qi'an exhaled, excitement gleaming in his eyes.

It's both a book and not a book. Both obvious and unremarkable. Based on his assessment and analysis of Zhou Min during this time, Xu Qi'an was confident this matched Zhou Min's style.

The three eagerly opened the calendar and, following the clues, counted to the first hundred and sixty-second character: Day!

Then the three hundred and forty-seventh character, the fourth character, the first character, and the second character.

Combined: Silent Daylight Fourth One Five!

Clearly, this was wrong.

Next, they used the second method, taking the page number instead of the character count.

If they used page numbers, then each character count corresponded to a specific day in the calendar. The combination was as follows:

Silent, 6th April, 15th January, 29th January , 25th January , 26th January .

"Wrong again," Xu Qi'an threw the calendar aside, cursing, "This approach is incorrect. Let's start over."

"Perhaps we should first decipher the character 'Silent' since it's the only character and comes first," Zhu Guangxiao suggested.

The leading position of the character was significant.

Xu Qi'an pinched the bridge of his nose, "Do you have any ideas?"

Zhu Guangxiao shook his head.

Xu Qi'an asked again, "The character 'silent' doesn't have any special meaning in our constabulary, does it?"

Song Tingfeng pondered, "The Inspector General and Gold Gong Jiang have already studied the cipher. If 'silent' referred to some code within the constabulary, Sir Jiang and the Inspector General should have discovered it."

"What could the Inspector General discover? He's only good at guessing riddles," Xu Qi'an sneered, then suddenly froze.

An idea sparked in his exhausted mind like a flash of lightning.

He recalled that when he was still at the police academy, a professor who studied criminal psychology had said that a person's behavior is closely related to their habits.

When profiling and analyzing a target, it's essential to gather as much information about them as possible and understand their habits.

No matter how cunning the criminal, their behavior patterns always reveal their habits.

What were Zhou Min's habits?

Word puzzles!

Yang Yingying had mentioned that Zhou Min enjoyed playing word puzzles with her while drinking. So, when Zhou Min was thinking about how to hide evidence and leave clues, he habitually leaned towards word puzzles. From this, Xu Qi'an deduced that the only character in the two sets of ciphers was also a word puzzle. Xu Qi'an's thought process became increasingly clear.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao exchanged looks, tacitly keeping the silence. Just then, Xu Qi'an's keen insight returned, becoming as sharp and intelligent as when he was investigating the Sangpo case.

\*Silent (默) can be split into black (黑) and dog (犬)...\* Xu Qi'an pinched his brow and asked, "I remember a colleague mentioning that Huangbo Street is the dog market?"

Song Tingfeng nodded, "Yes, it's the dog market. Why?"

Xu Qi'an continued, "The character 'Silent' can be split into 'black' and 'dog'. Huangbo Street was a clue left by Zhou Min in the previous word puzzle game. I think it matches now."

"You think the cipher points to the dog market?" Song Tingfeng frowned. "What does 'black' represent? Is it too arbitrary to assume the cipher points to the dog market based solely on the character 'dog'?"

"I have an idea." Xu Qi'an didn't finish his sentence and instead went outside to call an attendant.

"Sir, what do you need?" the attendant asked.

"How well do you know Huangbo Street?" Xu Qi'an inquired.

“Huangbo Street is a messy place. It's quiet during the day but becomes chaotic at night with all sorts of people—petty thieves, travelers, and even mountain bandits,” the attendant replied.

\*Are they really selling dog meat or something else...\* Xu Qi'an mused and asked, “Would mountain bandits and travelers go there just for dog meat?”

“Of course not. While on the surface the street sells dog meat, the place is actually a black market. They sell illicit goods and conduct shady transactions,” the attendant explained.

“Have you been to the black market?” Xu Qi'an asked.

The attendant looked embarrassed and mumbled, “I went to buy dog meat once.”

\*Buying dog meat shouldn't make you look so ashamed...\* Xu Qi'an frowned, “Speak plainly.”

The attendant whispered, “I visited Xin No. 6 to find a prostitute. Buying dog meat refers to that.”

\*Too young, so shy about visiting prostitutes...\* The three men sighed in unison.

“Xin No. 6?” Xu Qi'an asked.

“Black market shops are named using the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches,” the young attendant, blushing furiously, felt like he was being publicly humiliated.

Xu Qi'an nodded, “Got it, you can leave now.”

After the attendant closed the door and the sound of his footsteps faded, Xu Qi'an shrugged, “The situation is clear. Black Dog refers to the black market that sells dog meat.”

It wasn't surprising that such a place existed under the nose of the authorities. Even in the most prosperous city, black markets flourished.

Huangbo Street wasn't far from the station, but it was part of the outer city and there was no curfew at night.

“So, what do the other codes mean?” Song Tingfeng pondered aloud, “They should tell us who to find or how to find someone at the black market.”

“The answer is in the calendar,” Xu Qi'an stated confidently.

“We've already checked it,” Zhu Guangxiao reminded him.

“The calendar idea was correct, but how could Zhou Min leave such crucial clues in his belongings?” Xu Qi'an countered, “It's not this year's calendar, but one from a past year.”

“Which year?” Zhu Guangxiao asked gravely.

“Guangxiao, today you're clearly not as sharp as Tingfeng. There are many past years; the Great Feng has been around for 600 years. Finding the right calendar

would be like finding a needle in a haystack. Zhou Min wouldn't be that foolish. Since it's not this year's calendar, it must hold some special significance to him.

"The calendar itself may not be special, but the year might be—like a birth year or a wedding date. My guess is it's from fourteen years ago.

"That's when Zhou Min was assigned to Yunzhou."

The fourteen-year-old calendar wasn't available at the station, but the constabulary and bookshops kept old records. To keep a low profile, Song Tingfeng chose to go to a bookshop instead of the constabulary.

After a short while, he returned on horseback with the old calendar.

Xu Qi'an found paper and ink, but thinking his handwriting wasn't presentable, he handed the task to Zhu Guangxiao.

They used their previous method, deciphering by character count, but the resulting words made no sense.

Next, they tried the page number method. Page 162 corresponded to the 12th of May, which was suitable for market opening, weddings, moving into a new home, and traveling but unsuitable for prayers, opening warehouses, and digging wells.

"Market opening!" Xu Qi'an seized on the key information, "It suggests we go to the black market at night."

Song Tingfeng agreed.

Next was the second set of codes: 347 4 1 2.

Xu Qi'an turned to page 347, which was dated January 15th. As he skimmed the calendar, a realisation dawned on him. He said:

"I understand now!

"One hundred sixty-two and three hundred forty-seven refer to page numbers, while four, one, and two refer to the character counts on those pages. Tingfeng, look at the fourth, first, and second characters on this page. What do they spell?"

Song Tingfeng squinted and read, "Ding No. 15..."

Recalling what the attendant had said, he blurted out, "Black market shop, Ding No. 15?"

The puzzle was finally solved...

Xu Qi'an and Song Tingfeng relaxed back in their chairs, exhaling deeply.

Zhu Guangxiao also set down his pen, feeling a sense of relief wash over him.

Xu Qi'an walked to the table and took a closer look, then exclaimed in surprise, "Guangxiao, your handwriting is terrible."

Song Tingfeng came over to join the fun, exclaiming, "It's unbearable!"



Zhu Guangxiao retorted, "Is your handwriting any better?"

Song Tingfeng replied proudly, "My calligraphy is as good as any scholar's. When I was young, I saved up for paper and ink to practice."

Xu Qi'an said, "When I was young and poor, I practiced writing with a brush dipped in water on the ground. I did that for twenty years."

Zhu Guangxiao skeptically eyed them and handed over the pen, "Then show me."

Xu Qi'an and Song Tingfeng, understanding each other perfectly, turned and walked away, arm in arm:

"Let's go rest. Calligraphy isn't something to show off."

"I agree."

Watching them leave, Zhu Guangxiao muttered to himself, looking at his own writing, and resolved to start practicing calligraphy diligently so as not to fall behind his teammates.

Back in his room, Xu Qi'an took off his shoes and sat in meditation to ensure he would be in good condition for the black market visit at night.

Maybe due to extreme mental fatigue, he struggled to enter the meditative state. His thoughts scattered uncontrollably.

\*... By now, Huaqing and Lin'an should have received my letters. I hope the letter can make Huaqing forgive me, although I don't know what I did wrong... The silly Lin'an will surely be moved; she's easier to woo than the naive foodie Chu Caiwei...\*

As for whether the princesses would exchange letters or if others would see them, Xu Qi'an thought it unlikely.

First, Huaqing and Lin'an didn't get along, so they wouldn't share letters. Also, given the letters' intimate nature, no maiden would share such things.

Second, Huaqing and Lin'an were mature princesses, old enough to bear children and have the freedom to send and receive letters. Neither the emperor nor concubines would interfere, and no one else would dare to open their letters.

It was almost impossible for Xu Qi'an, a lowly Bronze Gong, to get caught writing affectionate letters to the princesses.

Gradually, Xu Qi'an entered a state of visualisation.

Chapter 208. Letters

The capital, the imperial palace.

The Crown Prince held a banquet in the Eastern Palace, inviting his royal siblings. Being his immediate younger sister, Lin'an arrived early, sitting on a chair and swinging her feet under her skirt.

Today, she wasn't wearing her usual red dress but a magnificent long dress with a purple base and gold trim. Her hair was adorned with a ruby coral crown, with coral serving as the framework, and two lifelike golden phoenixes flanking the ruby, with six strings of pearls hanging down.

Additionally, she wore other ornate accessories like golden hairpins and jade hairpins, looking lavishly and exquisitely dressed.

Purple was a colour commonly used by the concubines in the palace to highlight their elegance and nobility, which wasn't typically suitable for young girls. However, Lin'an's noble aura gave her the appearance of a beautifully dressed doll.

Her round face and charming peach blossom eyes made her look both enchanting and innocent, perfectly balancing multiple qualities.

There was still half an hour before lunch, and the princes and princesses gradually arrived at the Eastern Palace. Everyone was accustomed to Lin'an's intricate style of beauty.

Among the four princesses, probably only she could pull off such an extravagant look. The other princesses wouldn't be able to handle such opulence.

Although Huaiqing had the looks, her temperament didn't match.

"Is Huaiqing not here yet?" Lin'an's lively eyes darted around as she looked expectantly toward the door.

"She's busy with duties and will come later," the Crown Prince said with a smile, then cleared his throat:

"Today, the Sitianjian has prepared a special batch of chicken bouillon, and some were sent to the palace. I especially invited all of my brothers and sisters to taste it."

In fact, a few days ago, Sitianjian had "offered" a batch of chicken bouillon to the imperial kitchen, and the princes and princesses had already enjoyed this addictive seasoning.

Talking about this popular topic, the princes and princesses engaged in a lively conversation.

"Indeed, the taste of chicken bouillon is irresistible, but it does make you thirsty."

"Father mentioned yesterday that it shouldn't be consumed too much; a diet of light flavours is the way to stay healthy."

The princes secretly rolled their eyes at Emperor Yuanjing's obsession with health. Only middle-aged people would be so concerned with such things. Why should young people worry about health?

Lin'an looked around, lifting her round, white chin, "Do you know who invented chicken bouillon?"

At this point, she turned into a spoiled brat, flaunting arrogantly.

The princes and princesses genuinely didn't know the answer. Only three people in the palace knew about it: the Crown Prince, Lin'an, and Huaiqing. If they didn't reveal it, no one else would know.

Under the curious prodding of her siblings, Lin'an raised her chin higher and said with a sweet smile, "It was Xu Qi'an, my subordinate."

She emphasized the latter part.

“Xu Qi’an?” The Fourth Prince frowned, “Isn’t he Huaqing’s person?”

The Fourth Prince was Huaqing’s full brother.

“He’s mine now. He swore allegiance to me,” Lin’an boasted about stealing Huaqing’s man.

In the eyes of their siblings, she had always been bullied by Huaqing. Now that she finally gained an upper hand, she couldn’t help but flaunt it. The more outstanding Xu Qi’an was, the more accomplished she felt.

The princes and princesses chuckled quietly, while the Fourth Prince frowned, displeased by Lin’an’s actions.

Although he was the son of the Empress and theoretically held the highest status, the position of Crown Prince had gone to the eldest son of a concubine, Lin’an’s full brother. Moreover, Emperor Yuanjing treated his other children equally but showed special favour to Lin’an while disliking Huaqing. This left the Fourth Prince feeling even more insecure.

\*Mother had said Huaqing is strong-willed and domineering, much like Father in his younger days, but with even more talent. If she were a man, Father would probably dislike her even more.\*

“Who does Xu Qi’an belong to?”

At this moment, Huaqing’s clear, melodious voice came from the door. The eldest princess, dressed in a moonflower-colored palace dress, had arrived.

The princes and princesses clearly saw Lin’an’s arrogance deflate instantly. She looked unwilling but quickly backed down, pouting, and said loudly, “Half to each of us!”

Using the most defiant tone to say the most submissive words.

Huaqing snorted.

She knew about Xu Qi’an’s attempts to please both sides and tolerated it mainly because Lin’an was a silly sister with no real threat. Stealing people was just a way to spite her.

If any other prince tried to take her people, Huaqing would retaliate without mercy. But with Lin’an, she was content with just scaring her.

Huaqing walked up to Lin’an, looking down at her, and said coolly, “Move, I want to sit here.”

Lin’an looked up, seeing only Huaqing’s eyes, the lower half of her face being hidden from this angle by her ample bosom.

This made her feel frustrated. This sister not only had more talent but also a better figure. Besides the Emperor’s favor, she couldn’t compete with Huaqing in anything.

Biaobiao was a delicate girl, and felt aggrieved being bullied by Huaqing, turning her head away.

There was nothing she could do. She couldn’t fight, arguing was beneath a princess’s dignity, and Huaqing, being a scholar, could scold without using foul language. Lin’an couldn’t win against her.

The Crown Prince coughed and tried to lighten the mood, “Huaqing, don’t be harsh with Lin’an, you’re her elder sister.”

Only then did Huaiqing let Biaobiao off, no longer bullying her.

...

While Eating, the Crown Prince casually remarked, "Have you heard about what happened in the Imperial Study today?"

The Fourth Prince immediately responded, "The admonitory stele and the Transport Office?"

The Crown Prince nodded, smiling, "We don't need to comment on the Transport Office matter. The court officials and Father will decide on that. But the admonitory stele incident is truly remarkable."

The Fourth Prince nodded in agreement, "\*Your food and your money, flesh and blood of the people. The people are easy to abuse, the heavens are hard to cheat.\*"

"An excellent poem!" Huaiqing's eyes lit up, her elegant face beaming with radiance.

She usually remained silent during meals, but the essence of this poem stirred the eldest princess more than the lines, \*Drunk, he knows not if the sky floats in the water\* and \*its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.\*

\*What a terrible poem, with no artistic conception...\* thought Lin'an.

Huaiqing, staring at the Fourth Prince, asked, "Who composed this poem?"

She never paid much attention to palace affairs.

The Crown Prince answered on his behalf, "It was Xu Qi'an."

"Excellent poem!" Lin'an clapped her small hands on the table, loudly praising.

"That's just his nature," Huaiqing chuckled.

"What do you mean 'his nature', as if you know him well?" Lin'an retorted habitually.

Huaiqing initially didn't want to respond but, seeing the princes all watching her, she pondered for a moment and said:

"Xu Qi'an is someone who despises evil passionately. He disregards minor faults without compromising on major principles, unlike those hypocritical scholars who only pay lip service."

"Is it true that he cut down a Silver Gong with his blade?" The Crown Prince asked with a smile.

"The other day, I had a casual chat with Duke Wei and mentioned him," Huaiqing glanced at the princes, "Duke Wei said that since Xu Qi'an joined the constabulary, he has never been corrupt, not even taking a penny."

"Then why do you say he disregards minor faults?" Lin'an felt that Huaiqing was slandering her loyal follower.

She glared at Huaiqing fiercely.

Princess Huaiqing said, "Xu Qi'an indulges in the Jiaofangsi, stays out all night, and has a close relationship with the Oiran of the Reflecting Plum Pavilion, Fuxiang."

Lin'an's smile gradually faded, her expressive peach blossom eyes widened, and she shouted, "Nonsense."

She sulkily ate a few more bites, feeling that the food had lost its taste, then threw down her chopsticks in anger, declaring, "I'm not eating anymore."

She stood up, lifted her skirt, and left with her personal maid.

....

Lin'an storming off didn't affect the others' meal. The Crown Prince felt a bit awkward, so he raised his wine cup with a smile to keep the banquet going.

After the banquet, Huaiqing returned to her own courtyard, drank a large bowl of tea, and then sat in her boudoir to meditate and practice Qi cultivation.

She had secretly advanced to the Refining Qi stage. The other day, she sought out Wei Yuan for a "chat" precisely because of this matter.

Huaiqing was highly talented but had always kept a low profile. As she grew older, she felt it was appropriate to gradually enhance her cultivation.

The main thing was, for the whole year this year, Emperor Yuanjing had not once mentioned anything about arranging marriages for the princesses.

\*Father focuses on cultivating immortality, and Mother is detached from worldly affairs. If Emperor Yuanjing doesn't bring it up, she won't bother either. Mother has always been like this; though she is the Empress, she is completely uninterested in her duties and status.\*

"Your Highness, a letter has arrived from the manor, it was sent from Qingzhou," a guard hurried in.

By "manor", he referred to Huaiqing's residence within the Imperial City.

The letters for the princes and princesses generally didn't enter the palace directly but are delivered to their respective manors.

Qingzhou? Princess Huaiqing thought it was a letter from Ziyang Jushi, nodding, "Bring it here."

The guard respectfully handed it over and withdrew.

Huaiqing opened the letter. The first sentence read: \*As I write this letter, I have arrived at the border of Qingzhou...\*

Huaiqing immediately realized it was from Xu Qi'an. The letter was long, filling two pages. She concentrated on reading it, and her expression turned grave upon reading about the corruption case in the Transport Office in Yuzhou.

As she continued reading, the tone became less formal. The latter part wasn't a subordinate reporting to a superior but rather a man confiding in a woman he admired....

\*...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.\*

Princess Huaiqing muttered these beautiful words, immersed in the imagery of a lotus flower in full bloom.

"It's a pity Xu Ningyan didn't study literature," Princess Huaiqing said softly, then tipped the envelope, and a withered lotus petal fell out.

\*Is this kid expressing his love for me through this letter?\* Princess Huaiking fell into contemplation.

\*If I were to present this letter to the palace, even ten heads falling wouldn't be enough for him.\*

She folded the letter carefully, tucked it into an infrequently read book, and saved it.

Then, with great interest, she called a maid to grind ink and wrote down the poetic phrases about the lotus from the letter to hang in her study.

Looking at the writing, Huaiking's lips curled into a faint smile.

...

"What's wrong with Her Highness?"

"I don't know. Ever since returning from the Crown Prince's place, she's been sullen."

"Perhaps she was bullied by the Eldest Princess... but it doesn't seem like it. If the Eldest Princess had bullied her, she would've already cursed her out and forgotten about it."

In the courtyard, several palace maids huddled together, chatting. Lin'an had just thrown a tantrum, and now only her two personal maids were with her in her bedroom. The others didn't dare to approach her in such a foul mood.

"Why must Your Highness quarrel with Princess Huaiking..." a personal maid advised.

"It's not her!" Lin'an fumed. "It's that damn running dog."

The two maids were taken aback before realizing who "damn running dog" referred to. One of them had even been playfully spanked by Xu Qi'an.

The maids exchanged confused glances, thinking that the "damn running dog" had been out of the capital for over half a month.

"How did he offend Your Highness again?"

"I don't know." Lin'an's expression was gloomy. "I just feel upset."

"???"

At this moment, a guard arrived at the courtyard, requesting to see Princess Lin'an. One of the maids, recognizing him as a guard from their own residence, reluctantly knocked on the door:

"Your Highness, a guard from the residence seeks an audience. He says there's a letter for you from Qingzhou."

A letter from Qingzhou? Lin'an was puzzled. Her social circle was very small, consisting mostly of siblings within the palace, imperial clan siblings, and occasionally the family members of officials who would write to her, inviting her to private tea parties in their boudoirs.

But none of these connections included Qingzhou.

"Who sent the letter?" the maid asked on her behalf.

"I don't know," replied the maid outside.

The personal maid glanced at Lin'an, who nodded. She then turned and called out, "Bring it in."

#### Chapter 209. The Dogmeat Store

The palace maid outside took the letter from the guard and handed it to the maid who had opened the door. She glanced at Princess Lin'an, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, looking sullen, and wisely retreated.

The maid who had once been playfully spanked by Xu Qi'an opened the letter and glanced at it. After reading the first line, she cleverly decided not to read further, having guessed who it was from. She covered her mouth and laughed, saying, "Your Highness, a letter from that running dog."

Lin'an immediately turned her face, glanced at the two pages of the letter, and turned away again. "Too long; not reading."

This was typical of Princess Lin'an's character. The two maids stifled their laughter, placed the letter on the desk, and softly said, "We'll step out now, Your Highness. Call us if you need anything."

Once the maids had left, Lin'an frequently looked toward the desk. When the sound of their footsteps had faded, she muttered to herself as she walked over to the desk and picked up the letter to read it.

She was still upset by what Huaqing had said, feeling that the seemingly honest Xu Qi'an was actually a lecherous rogue who frequented the Jiaofangsi. The thought made her feel uneasy.

But she didn't know the details, so she had been sulking ever since returning.

By rights, as *the* Princess Lin'an, she had many guards under her command, and she never concerned herself with their private lives.

She sat at the desk, straightened her back, and slightly lowered her head, her posture full of vitality and grace, a result of her training since childhood.

*"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."*

"Ugh!" Lin'an spat, but a smile tugged at her lips.

Such an informal opening fully expressed the writer's dependence and longing, highlighting her own importance. Princess Lin'an loved this kind of sentiment.

She was a romantic at heart, and had there been domineering CEOs in this era, she would have been a fervent fan of romance novels.

She continued reading, and the letter recounted many strange and thrilling events. For instance, there was an incident of attempted murder by a water ghost in the canal, and her running dog bravely jumping into the river to save him, fighting the ghost for three hundred blows to rescue a poor guard, who then gratefully knelt and kowtowed. But her servant lifted him up and said in a thunderous voice, "A man's knees are like gold!"

*"What a wonderful phrase..."* Lin'an smiled, becoming more engrossed as she read.

She loved reading about these strange and bizarre events, which were both interesting and thrilling.

Outside, the two personal maids peeked through a crack in the door and saw Princess Lin'an sitting at the desk, completely absorbed, sometimes laughing softly, sometimes frowning, and at other times showing a frightened expression.

They quietly retreated and whispered to each other:

“Is the princess in a better mood?”

“Yes, it's obvious... she's reading the letter so intently.”

“Sister, what's in the letter?”

“Don't ask. We were taught in the palace not to pry into our mistress's affairs.”

“That Xu Qi'an is truly something. The princess has only known him for a short while, yet she's so taken with him... Well, I won't gossip about it.”

...

Lin'an eagerly read to the end, where the story concluded, and Xu Qi'an mentioned a type of lotus in Qing Province called the Red Lotus, which was as brilliant as fire and always reminded him of her stunning appearance in a red dress...

As she read, Lin'an's plump, jade-like face turned a shy red, looking enchanting.

Even though she knew no one was in the room, she still nervously glanced at the door and then clutched the letter tightly in her hand.

“He... he...”

Princess Lin'an heard her heart pounding in her chest, her oval face burning.

\*How dare he write such a letter to me? Flirting with a princess like this, if it were to be discovered, he would be sentenced to death.\* Thinking this, Lin'an wanted to tear up the letter to destroy the evidence.

But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Since her birth, this was the first time she had received such a letter, full of exciting stories and beautiful words.

Her bright, dark eyes flickered with an idea. She placed the dried lotus petal and the letter together, hiding them in a thick book, a rare edition given to her by her mother.

“Now, no one will find it!” Lin'an sighed with relief, hands on her hips.

Soon, her two personal maids heard the princess call out, “Come in and help me change. I want to wear my red dress!”

The maids responded and entered the room, helping Princess Lin'an change into a beautiful, fiery red dress.

Lin'an nodded with satisfaction, spun around gracefully, and the skirt bloomed like a flower.

“Look at my stunning elegance!” she said, lifting her chin confidently.

The maids exchanged puzzled glances.



“Your Highness, aren’t you angry anymore?” the maid who had been spanked by Xu Qi'an tentatively asked.

“Angry about what?” Lin'an replied.

“That running dog,” the maid said, but as soon as she spoke, she saw Lin'an's delicate eyebrows knit together, and she angrily interrupted,

“What running dog? How dare you call him that? You should address him as Master Xu.”

\*My running dog is not for others to call,\* she thought.

...

Reflecting Plum Pavilion.

Fuxiang, dressed in a white cotton gown, with her hair loose and unadorned, was picking plum blossoms in the courtyard with a bamboo basket.

The vibrant plum blossoms contrasted beautifully with the serene courtyard. Her intricate white gown trailed on the ground, and her snow-white wrists held the bamboo basket, which was gradually filled with clusters of plum blossoms. She raised her other hand to reach the branches.

The plum blossoms and the beauty complemented each other perfectly.

The maidservants in the courtyard found this scene delightful. Their lady had become more serene lately, spending her days practicing dance, playing the qin, and appreciating plum blossoms, engaging in refined activities.

She rarely showed herself at social gatherings and often left guests behind to have a drink or two before slipping away. The guests were not offended; on the contrary, they adored her even more.

Gradually, merely catching a glimpse of the oiran Fuxiang became something men bragged about for days.

After the poem “subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.” another poem had also gained popularity: “\*Beauty draws the bead curtains red, lost in thought, brows a-furrowed...\*”

The Jiaofangsi created a story to promote this poem:

The talented Sir Xu had made Lady Fuxiang cry, and in his desperation to cheer her up, he drank three cups of strong liquor. The alcohol inspired him to write this poem.

A poem without a story lacks soul, but once given a tale, it becomes a subject of endless discussion.

Many scholars believed this fabricated story, thinking Fuxiang to be a talent. They hoped that by associating with her, they too might write timeless poems like Xu Qi'an and achieve lasting fame.

This was the Great Feng's version of hype and image-building!

However, since Sir Xu had left the capital, Lady Fuxiang often sighed and sent people every few days to inquire about his return.

At this moment, a young servant ran into the courtyard, holding a letter and waving it from afar:

“Lady Fuxiang, there’s a letter from Qingzhou, sent by Sir Xu.”

Xu Qi’an did not dare to sign his name on letters to the princesses, but he had no such reservations with letters to Fuxiang or his family.

Initially enthusiastic, Fuxiang was stunned for a moment, then dropped the bamboo basket and rushed forward, not waiting for the maid to deliver the letter.

She snatched the envelope from the young servant’s hand, her bright eyes sparkling like a girl receiving a surprise gift.

\*Xu Lang actually sent me a letter...\* Fuxiang’s heart overflowed with joy as she realized she held a special place in that man’s heart, beyond mere casual acquaintance.

This realization made her feel light-headed, almost dizzy.

“My lady...” a maid whispered, noticing the foolishly joyful smile on her face.

Fuxiang ignored her, lifting her skirt with one hand and holding the letter in the other, she quickly returned to her bedroom. She closed the door, impatiently opened the letter, and read it while walking to the bed, eventually sitting on the edge.

She bit her pink lips, reading each word slowly, afraid that if she read too quickly, it would be over too soon.

Seeing that Xu Qi’an had not visited the Jiaofangsi in Qingzhou, Fuxiang felt inexplicably happy. When he mentioned missing her and suggested she trim her nails, it took her a moment to understand.

“Ugh!”

Fuxiang blushed and tutted, hugging the letter to her chest like a treasure. She lay down on the bed, her plump lips curving into a joyful smile.

....

The letter to Sitianjian was received a bit late, coinciding with mealtime. Chu Caiwei, striving still to become a Master of Alchemy, felt that she had used up all her energy for the coming year too.

Next year, she planned to take it easy, postponing her attempts to advance to the next rank for a few years to avoid overworking herself.

Her once round, oval face had slimmed down, to the point where her chin started becoming pointed.

She was sitting in the dining hall with her senior brothers and sisters, about to have dinner. But before eating, she decided to read the letter from Xu Ningyan.

She felt a small surge of happiness.

\*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...\*

\*Qingzhou also has several delicacies, I’ll list them out for you here...\*

As she read, Chu Caiwei’s eyes widened, and she gulped down saliva. By the time she finished the letter, the usual food of Sitianjian seemed unappetizing.

She found it hard to swallow.

"Damn Xu Ningyan..." Chu Caiwei slapped the table, stood up in anger, and stormed out.

"Sister Caiwei, where are you going?"

"I'm going to Qingzhou, and Yuzhou too!"

"Huh?"

"To the restaurant! I refuse to eat Sitianjian's lousy food anymore, it's terrible!"

...

Just before dusk, Xu Lingyue returned home from school with Little Pea, followed by two strong servants.

Auntie, wearing a deep red silk dress and a pleated long skirt, was trimming the potted plants in the hall with scissors.

As the matron of the family, auntie found her role rather dull. The children were growing up and not yet married, so there were no troublesome daughters-in-law to contend with. Moreover, the Xu family was not populous, unlike those grand households bustling with people inside and out. Hence, the burden of managing the household was light.

She spent her days drinking tea, watering flowers, and occasionally taking the household servants out for a stroll.

The inner city was indeed more prosperous and safer than the outer city. She could walk the streets without fear of encountering bullies because the inner city had Nightwatchers patrolling, the Five Guard corps of the capital, and constables from the prefectural constabulary.

Even at her age, when she went out, men still stared at her in a daze, how bothersome.

Xu Lingyue entered the hall and saw her mother bending over to trim the plants. Her slender waist and the loose silk dress revealed a plump and full figure.

She felt a bit envious.

"Mum, I'm back..." Xu Lingyin, with a small cloth bag hanging around her neck, ran towards her mother. The bag swung back and forth as she ran, making her unsteady and causing her to bump into Auntie's rear.

"Stop being so noisy." Auntie turned around and scolded her.

After reprimanding the little girl, she looked at her elder daughter: "How did Lingyin perform in school?"

Little Pea had started school because Xu Xinnian decided on this requirement during his last visit home. It was not out of dissatisfaction but simply because he didn't want to see his younger sister waste her education.

So Xu Xinnian arranged for her to attend a well-known school in the inner city. The teacher was an old scholar, very strict in his teaching. Although he was well overqualified to teach children, the parents' generous payments made it worthwhile.

The children attending school with Xu Lingyin were not from ordinary families.

Xu Lingyue glanced at her carefree sister and sighed softly, speaking gently:

"The teacher said she reads the loudest and most earnestly during class, but she forgets everything after class. Today, she finally memorized three lines of the 'Three Character Classic'... the teacher was almost moved to tears."

Auntie felt embarrassed and poked the young girl's forehead with her finger: "Dummy, you need to use your brain when reading. Don't let it go in one ear and out the other."

"I'm not a dummy, no, no, no," Xu Lingyin protested loudly.

"You are a dummy."

"Mother is the dummy because I came from you," Little Pea retorted.

"... " Auntie was speechless. She grabbed her and gave her a few smacks on the bottom. Xu Lingyin, with her thick skin, wasn't afraid at all, still trying to prove she wasn't a dummy.

Auntie sighed, deciding not to argue with the young girl. It only made her more exasperated without achieving anything.

"Your brother sent a few letters home, they're on the table. Lingyue, you should take a look."  
Auntie was illiterate.

Xu Lingyue's eyes lit up, and she walked excitedly to the table, picking up the letters and scanning them. There were three letters, addressed to her, her father, and her mother.

"Mother, big brother sent you a letter too."

Auntie was surprised, her eyes glistening with delight, thinking her troublesome nephew still cared about her.

"I'll read it, I'll read it..." Little Pea, thinking she was now a scholar after a few days of school, insisted on reading the letters.

Xu Lingyue smiled and handed her the letter addressed to her father, then opened the one addressed to herself.

Little Pea took the letter, frowning at the many words: "Big brother is amazing, he can write so many words. His writing is better than mine."

"Obviously. Are you going to read it or not?" Auntie sat down.

"At the beginning, man's nature is good. Their natures are similar..." she recited.

"Is that a letter? Did your brother write that?" Auntie was angry.

"This is the letter, I read it out," Little Pea insisted, flapping her arms like wings to emphasize her point.

"That's just what you know, isn't it?"

By then, Xu Lingyue had finished reading her brother's letter. She carefully kept the dried flower petal he sent, planning to put it in a scented sachet for safekeeping.

Her delicate face filled with a smile, she then opened the letter addressed to her mother: "Mother, let me read the letter from big brother."

Auntie immediately adopted a more relaxed posture, nodding with feigned indifference: "Mm."

"Please look after Lingyin well! End of letter." Xu Lingyue awkwardly smiled, "Big brother's letters are concise and to the point..."

"He wrote that to make me angry on purpose," Auntie exclaimed, turning away in annoyance.

...

Xu Qi'an, along with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, donned casual clothes and carried only their swords. Before curfew, they left the inn and headed towards Huangbo Street.

They ordered a table of dishes at a small roadside restaurant, drinking and waiting for sunset. Xu Qi'an held a chopstick in his mouth and a wine cup in his hand, watching as the street grew quieter and the sky darkened.

When the last ray of sunlight disappeared in the west, he put down his wine cup, "Waiter, the bill."

Song Tingfeng watched as Xu Qi'an paid with silver nuggets and asked as they left the restaurant, "Ningyan, where do you get so much silver? I never see you use copper coins."

"Copper coins are beneath me, the child of fortune..." Xu Qi'an replied, "It's none of your business."

"No, I think that piece of broken silver looked familiar, it's missing a corner... I lost three cash of silver yesterday, also missing a corner, could it be mine?" Song Tingfeng wondered.

"Be confident, drop the 'could be', it is your silver." Xu Qi'an patted his shoulder, "I found it by your door."

"You motherfuck... give me back my silver!" Song Tingfeng chased after him.

Soon, they arrived at Huangbo Street, one of the famous black markets in Baidi City. Unlike the deserted streets outside, this place was bustling with people.

However, everyone wore hoods or masks, hiding their identities.

The three donned black robes and hoods, hiding their swords under their robes, and entered Huangbo Street.

The strong smell of blood filled the air. The shops on both sides uniformly sold dog meat, with live dogs, cooked meat, and raw meat on display.

"I haven't had dog meat in years..." Xu Qi'an was tempted.

After finishing their business, he planned to buy some dog meat to take back to the inn. Eating dog meat around a hotpot in the cold winter was a great pleasure in life.

Soon, they found shop Ding No. 15 by following the signboards. From the outside, it appeared to be another shop selling raw dog meat, but the keen-eared trio simultaneously heard the sound of women talking and laughing inside.

This was indeed a “dogmeat store”.

## Chapter 210. Whoever Hung the Bell Should Unite It

This was a two-story small building, constructed with a mix of limestone bricks and wood, showing signs of years of wear and tear.

The shop owner was a thin middle-aged man with sharp eyes, scrutinising the three cloaked figures standing at his door.

"Dear customers, would you like to buy some dog meat?" the shop owner tentatively asked.

Song Tingfeng replied in a raspy voice, "How much for the dog meat outside and how much for the dog meat inside?"

Upon hearing this, the shop owner immediately plastered a smile on his face, recognising them as seasoned patrons.

"Dog meat outside is one cash of silver per ounce, inside, it's three cash."

Considering the quality, three cash of silver for private prostitutes was actually not much cheaper than in the capital. As old hands in this business, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao shook their heads in disapproval.

Xu Qi'an didn't think much of it. Since entering this line of work, he had mingled with the industry's elite. A tea gathering would cost ten taels of silver; three cash were nothing... What? I got it for free? Oh, that's fine then.

The shop owner got up and led the three inside. It was then that Xu Qi'an noticed the owner had a limp.

Inside, the indescribable sounds became clearer; the soundproofing was terrible, chaotic noises were echoing around.

\*If Brother Chun were here, he'd definitely say, "Move at my lead: one-two-one, one-two-one, in out in out..."\* Xu Qi'an internally mocked.

The shop owner chuckled, "All the girls are occupied. Why don't you gentlemen wait a bit? I can get you some cooked meat."

It had just gotten dark, and the girls were already busy. The black market's dog meat business was thriving... Xu Qi'an didn't plan on waiting, having other intentions.

Xu Qi'an kicked open the room door, startling the girls inside who screamed. He went on to kick open more doors, drawing a chorus of angry shouts.

Several men, barely clothed, rushed out to confront Xu Qi'an.

He knocked each one down with a single hit. After dealing with five or six men, they stopped coming. He then took a deep breath and declared:

"Shop Ding No. 15 is reserved for tonight. Get out now. Your expenses will be covered by Master Song."

Hearing this, the patrons cooled down significantly. They accepted their fate since someone else was footing the bill, and there were plenty of dog meat shops in the black market.

By now, the shop owner had retreated to the cutting board, where he kept a meat cleaver. His hand rested on the handle as he narrowed his eyes and said in a dark voice:

"You aren't here to buy meat, you're here to cause trouble?"

"Calm down, shopkeeper. I'll explain shortly." Xu Qi'an said, then gathered the naked and half-naked women into one room and barked:

"Kneel down! Hands on heads!"

The bewildered women complied.

"Nobody leaves this room without my permission," Xu Qi'an said. Once they nodded fearfully, he closed the door and returned to the first floor.

The shop owner was still facing off with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao.

Xu Qi'an shut the shop door, then sat at the table and produced half a jade pendant, saying in a deep voice, "Do you recognise this?"

The shop owner's eyes fell on the pendant. In the candlelight, it was warm and smooth, with a clean break made by something sharp.

Xu Qi'an clearly saw the shop owner's pupils contract.

"What's your relation to Zhou Min?"

"You don't need to know. Just tell me, do you recognise this pendant?"

The shop owner nodded slightly, "Wait here."

He limped into a room on the east side. Due to his limp, he usually stayed on the first floor. The rooms on the second floor were for clients.

Xu Qi'an gave Zhu Guangxiao a look, signaling him to follow the shop owner to prevent any tricks.

Soon, the shop owner returned with half a jade pendant and a booklet, which matched Xu Qi'an's piece perfectly.

"You're here for this, right?" the shop owner said, handing over the booklet. "This is what Zhou Min left with me."

"Aren't you curious about anything?" Xu Qi'an didn't take the booklet immediately but stared at him.

"Would you tell me if I asked?"

"Not really, but you handed it over too easily."

The shop owner sighed, "When Zhou Min gave me this booklet, he instructed me to only hand it over to someone with the jade pendant. Even if he came himself without it, I wouldn't give it to him."

"It doesn't matter if you don't reveal your identity. I only recognise the pendant, not the person."

\*Recognising the pendant but not the person... because the one coming for the evidence might not be Zhou Min himself... An old spy's cautious mind. It's a pity he's dead...\* Xu Qi'an then took the

booklet, concentrating on it for a moment. It was an account book, recording the "unexplained" disappearance of military supplies from the Imperial Guard, each entry meticulously noted.

With this "evidence," Inspector Zhang could arrest and interrogate the second-rank Military Commander, although it wouldn't be enough for an immediate conviction.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao exchanged glances, seeing the joy in each other's eyes. With the evidence in hand, their trip to Yunzhou was nearly concluded.

"What's your relationship with Zhou Min? Why did he trust you with this booklet?" Xu Qi'an asked casually, taking a sip of tea.

"I was a wandering warrior. Once, because I meddled in someone's affairs, I offended a local official's son. He brought people to beat me up, and that's how my leg got broken. They were planning to take me out of the city to bury me alive, but Lord Zhou saved me. I owe him my life," the shop owner smiled wistfully.

"With a broken leg, roaming the Jianghu was a joke, so I settled in Baidi City... When he entrusted the booklet to me, I had a bad feeling something would happen to him. I couldn't do much to repay my debt, but I could at least keep his things safe."

"Thank you," Xu Qi'an nodded, silently adding: Leave the revenge to us.

The shop owner cut a few pounds of dog meat for them without charging, but Xu Qi'an insisted on leaving five taels of silver, not for the meat but to cover Master Song's tab.

Song Tingfeng repeatedly looked back, regretful, "Since we can't go back now, why not stay in the shop? I've already paid for it..."

"Yeah, there are beauties to serve us," Xu Qi'an teased, "Go back if you want, they're still wet and ready."

"...", Song Tingfeng thought Xu Ningyan's words were too crude. He should have said: They're waiting for my lord to pick the fruits.

.....

Late at night, in a large mansion.

Li Miaozhen sat cross-legged on the bed meditating, her long, lustrous black hair cascading down, highlighting her wheat-coloured face, which exuded a vigorous heroism.

Having been in Yunzhou for over a year, either training private soldiers or fighting bandits in the mountains, her once fair complexion had turned wheat-coloured.

However, as a disciple of the Heaven Sect, she didn't care about appearances. Their philosophy was: I have no feelings!

Without feelings, why bother about looks?

Finishing her meditation, she focused and sensed for a while, finding no trace of her demon in the mansion.

\*She hasn't returned?\*



\*Three Bronze Gongs should be easy for her, not to mention that Xu Qi'an is a wastrel drained by wine and women. There shouldn't be any problems.\*

\*She should have been able to extract information by charming them during the day, so why hasn't she returned yet?\*

\*Could it be that she went against her orders and got infatuated?\*

Li Miaozhen immediately dismissed this thought. This spirit had been with her for years and was obedient. In life, she was a good girl and, in death, a nearly grievance-free, kind ghost. Knowing Xu Qi'an's weakened state, she wouldn't drain his vitality.

\*Maybe she got playful...\* Li Miaozhen pulled the quilt over herself and went to sleep.

The next day, after finishing her morning routine and breakfast, and still not seeing her demon back as the sun rose high, she realised something was wrong.

She immediately drew a simple yin-yang bagua formation in the courtyard, placed cemetery soil, corpse oil, and a cat's eye in specific positions.

Then she took out a crumpled paper man, placed it on the yin-yang fish, and activated the formation with her qi.

In a realm unseen by ordinary people, the paper man absorbed the yin energy from the items, twitched its hands and feet, then staggered to its feet, only to collapse back into a normal paper man.

Li Miaozhen's face grew serious. The paper man, once attached to her demon, still held her residual energy and should have led her to it.

Such a result indicated three possibilities: one, she met an untimely end and her soul dissipated; two, she was sealed; three, she left Baidi City, beyond the paper man's sensing range.

Regardless of the possibility, it meant she was in trouble.

\*Whoever Hung the Bell Should Unite It!\* Li Miaozhen thought.

...

The courier station!

"Finished reading it yet? Is that account book authentic?"

In the room, Song Tingfeng asked Xu Qi'an, who was bent over the table, scrutinising the account book, with a loquat candy in his mouth.

Zhu Guangxiao, meanwhile, sat cross-legged, meditating and practicing his Qi.

"Do you even know what reconciling accounts means? It's like interrogating a suspect; you need to cross-examine face-to-face," Xu Qi'an replied irritably.

"Then why are you reading it so intently?" Song Tingfeng yawned. He hadn't rested well at the inn last night, still suffering from the aftereffects of the illusion spell he encountered the previous day.

Song Tingfeng was just waiting for Inspector Zhang to return so he could hand over the task and then go to the constabulary to commission a search for his beloved Susu.

"At least I can get a rough idea of the contents," Xu Qi'an answered.

"I'm going to the privy," Song Tingfeng said, not wanting to argue further.

After Song Tingfeng left the room, Xu Qi'an turned to Zhu Guangxiao, who was still meditating, "Do you want to look for Susu?"

Zhu Guangxiao opened his eyes, gave him a glance, but said nothing.

"Still haven't made up your mind?" Xu Qi'an smiled.

"Mmn," Zhu Guangxiao replied.

Xu Qi'an irresponsibly continued, "What's there to think about? You and Susu have already consummated your relationship, but that stinky sister at home hasn't even let you hold her hand, right? Yet she shamelessly demands a hundred taels of silver from you. Is she crazy for money? That old man treats his daughter like gold... Forget it, let's not badmouth her.

"Have you seen my aunt? She's a top-tier beauty. When my second uncle married her, the bride price was only twenty taels. Why does your fiancée think she's worth a hundred?"

A hundred taels of silver—an ordinary family would need to save for five years without spending a cent, and usually ten years to amass such an amount.

Caught between his brothers and his fiancée, Zhu Guangxiao chose to remain silent. But he couldn't help but think of Susu's sweet moans and her enchanting demeanor.

Just as Old Zhu was about to say something, Song Tingfeng's voice called from downstairs, "Ningyan, there's a guest..."