

## Nightwatcher 211

### Chapter 211. Social Death

Song Tingfeng's voice was strange, a mix of surprise and urgency. If one had to describe it, it would be like, "Honey, come see God!"

That was the tone.

Xu Qi'an stuffed the account book into his chest pocket and headed out first. Zhu Guangxiao quickly put on his boots and followed him out.

In the main hall of the post station, a young girl in light blue tight-fitting clothes sat at the table, drinking tea. Her form-fitting attire outlined her lithe, panther-like figure. The sleeves were tied, and her hair was still in a high ponytail.

Her neat and efficient attire highlighted her dashing and heroic demeanour.

\*Clearly, she was a valiant and heroic beauty... nothing like the holy maiden of the Heaven sect... Her sect taught her to be indifferent to emotions, but she became a righteous heroine instead...\* Xu Qi'an internally criticised while smiling on the surface, saying:

"General Li, we meet again."

\*This kid's dark circles are even deeper... his mental state is not good... he must have had his vitality drained by the demon.\* Li Miaozen scrutinised him with her clear, bright eyes and nodded slightly, "Lord Xu."

Xu Qi'an sat across from her, with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao on either side. The station attendant poured tea for them and then retreated.

Neither side spoke immediately, each lost in their own thoughts.

\*She must be here for the demon, not getting a report from her, and realising something went wrong...\* Xu Qi'an drank tea and pondered how to deal with the situation.

Should he return the demon to her?

He was reluctant. Such a beautiful spirit, just looking at it was pleasing to the eye. He had even thought of taking it to the capital to show Lingyin.

Moreover, its possession ability was very useful, suitable for various situations and environments.

"My lords..." Li Miaozen rubbed her teacup, choosing her words carefully, "Did you see a girl named Susu yesterday?"

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao immediately looked over.

Here it comes, the moment for the two little brothers to be publicly humiliated... Xu Qi'an's lips curled into a smile, "Yes, she formed an inseparable bond with my two colleagues."

Upon hearing this, their expressions varied. Song Tingfeng glanced at Zhu Guangxiao, thinking, it's me she bonded with, what does Zhu Guangxiao have to do with it?

Li Miaozen glanced at the two Bronze Gongs, feeling a bit sympathetic. From Xu Qi'an's words, it was clear that Susu had drained their vitality.

However, she was now more certain that the demon was in Xu Qi'an's hands; otherwise, he wouldn't say such things.

"Sorry, it was my oversight. I wonder if you could return her to me," Li Miaozen said sincerely.

"Setting up a trap to harm imperial officials and extracting confidential information is a capital crime, General Li," Xu Qi'an said with a faint smile.

Li Miaozen met his gaze calmly, neither defending nor getting angry, as if she completely disregarded the laws of Great Feng.

Xu Qi'an suddenly realised that Number Two was a hot-blooded youth. Although she was righteous and chivalrous, it didn't hide the fact that she was a rogue knight who broke the law and held extreme disdain for the irresponsible Emperor Yuanjing.

Most importantly, Number Two was a Rank Five expert. To her, everyone here was trash...

\*I need to change tack...\* Xu Qi'an laughed heartily, "However, we are not one to press advantages. Everything is negotiable. Mainly, I admire General Li's dedication. For over a year, you have tirelessly fought bandits for the country and the people, which puts me to shame.

"However, I am quite fond of Susu. Can General Li part with her?"

Xu Qi'an planned to bargain. Even otaku knew that their virtual wives were only for looking, but it didn't stop them from loving them.

Li Miaozen frowned, "This spirit, though a high-level wraith, cannot survive long on its own. It must continuously absorb vitality, long periods of starvation will eventually drive it mad and turn it into an uncontrollable monster.

"Only by staying with me can it maintain its current state. You are not a disciple of the Daoist sect, you do not understand such secret arts. Keeping her will only harm yourself and others."

\*Her real-life persona was very different from her online one... more serious in person... Well, a serious persona suits a leader, so it's probably a kind of disguise.\* Xu Qi'an said helplessly, "Alright."

He said to wait a moment and stood up, returning to the room.

Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng stared blankly at each other... \*What is a demon, and what does absorbing vitality mean? What were they talking about?\*

\*They just mentioned... Susu?\*

Soon, Xu Qi'an returned with a wine jug and placed it on the table with a thud. All three eyes focused on the jug.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao looked puzzled, but Li Miaozen narrowed her eyes, recognising the Daoist sealing charm engraved on the jug.

Xu Qi'an removed the lid, and the next moment, wisps of blue smoke rose from the jug, transforming into a stunningly beautiful woman. She glared at Xu Qi'an angrily and scolded coquettishly:

"Filthy man, I'm starving..."

Then she saw Li Miaozen, her face immediately brightened, but quickly turned pitiful. She cried and whimpered:

"Master, you have to stand up for me. This scoundrel bullied me, insulted me. If you came any later, I would have borne his bastard child..."

\*Susu...\* Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng felt like they were turning into ice statues in the cold January weather.

Bang!

Li Miaozen replaced the lid and nodded, "Thank you, Sir Xu, for your generosity. I owe you a favour. If you need anything in the future, just ask."

Xu Qi'an finally smiled, "General Li, you are too polite."

Number Two's promise was indeed valuable. Trading a demon that he couldn't keep for long for a promise was a good deal.

He escorted Li Miaozen out of the post station, and when they reached the door, he asked, "With your status and cultivation, General Li, surely you don't lack a demon, do you?"

Li Miaozen considered for a moment before responding, "Demons are not ordinary ghosts. They must be made from girls born in the yin year and yin month, who remained virgins even in death."

\*What constitutes a yin year and yin month?\* Xu Qi'an smiled and nodded, pretending to understand.

"However," Li Miaozen continued with a slight smile, "even if you raise a dog, you'll develop feelings for it, right?"

Xu Qi'an laughed, and the atmosphere between them became less formal and distant.

Seizing the moment, Li Miaozen asked, "Sir Xu, could you accompany me a bit further?"

Xu Qi'an responded with a warm smile, "It would be my pleasure."

He glanced back, seeing Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao sitting motionless, their backs lonely and desolate.

"Let's go!" Xu Qi'an's smile grew even brighter.

As they walked along the wide street, Li Miaozen carried a silver spear and had a sword strapped to her waist. Her heroic stride was captivating.

Xu Qi'an frequently turned his head, admiring the features of this Heaven Sect holy maiden. Her demeanour reminded him of a policewoman he had a crush on during his police academy days.

Short hair framing a beautiful face, clean complexion, long and straight legs in camouflage pants, and a firm chest under a dark green vest.

Comparing her to that police academy beauty, Xu Qi'an mentally concluded that Li Miaozen, with her white horse, silver spear, scarlet cloak, and soft armor, was even more impressive.

Li Miaozen said lightly, "Sir Xu, people in the martial world need not adhere strictly to etiquette, but I am still a woman. Staring at me like this is rather rude."

\*Bah, this man is indeed a lecher.\*

If lecher was her first impression at the banquet, now, Li Miaozen's label for Xu Qi'an was: a lecher with hidden depths.

\*It seems the impression of being a lecher is hard to shake... my reputation is suffering...\* Xu Qi'an's smile remained, "General Li reminds me of an old acquaintance."

Bah! Li Miaozen cursed inwardly but kept a smile on her face, "Baidi City is flourishing, but Sir Xu, traveling with the Inspector, you must have seen plenty of desolation, right?"

"Indeed, it's quite distressing."

"Typically, each province under the command of the capital has 20 to 30 garrisons, but the Yunzhou command has only 15. Do you know why?" Li Miaozen asked and answered herself, "Because Yunzhou is sparsely populated and plagued by bandits, making it impossible to station a large number of troops. Without soldiers, how can you fight bandits?"

According to the military system of Great Feng, provinces below the capital's command set up "garrisons," each with 5,600 soldiers. Counties below the provinces set up "posts," each with 1,100 soldiers.

Having only 15 garrisons in a province wasn't unheard of, but Yunzhou was a bandit-ridden area. It should have more than 25 garrisons to be adequately prepared.

"You only need to cultivate good fields. The army can farm during peacetime and become self-sufficient," Xu Qi'an suggested.

The commands across the country had military fields. When not in battle, soldiers worked like farmers.

Li Miaozen looked at him, "And what about military pay?"

... Xu Qi'an admitted, "My bad, my bad!"

He remembered that soldiers needed pay, not just food. The more soldiers recruited, the higher the pay needed. If pay couldn't be provided, the army could revolt at any time. History was full of such examples.

"I've been in Yunzhou for over a year, cooperating with Commander Yang Chuannan to fight bandits over twenty times. Each time, he did his best. I don't believe a man like that would collude with bandits," Li Miaozen said seriously, looking at Xu Qi'an.

"Sir Xu, you are a key figure in this investigation. Your stance will influence the Inspector's attitude. I hope you will handle this matter carefully."

"General Li overestimates me. I am just a lowly Bronze Gong," Xu Qi'an feigned surprise.

Li Miaozen said frankly, "I've investigated you, Sir Xu, and I believe I know you quite well."

\*For example, your proficiency in investigations and your affairs with multiple oiran in Jiaofangsi...\*

"It seems Sir Xu has a cousin studying at the Cloud Deer Academy?"

\*Number Two indeed suspects Number Three's identity... suspects Erlang is the enthusiastic scholar Number Three... I should take this opportunity to deepen the misunderstanding. Since Erlang is at the academy and Number Two is in Yunzhou, far apart... I can use Erlang's connections to gain Number Two's trust... revealing my identity is too dangerous...\* Xu Qi'an smiled and said:

"Yes, Cijiu is an ambitious scholar, highly regarded by the scholars of Cloud Deer Academy. He is said to be groomed as a future successor."

\*Groomed as a successor... No wonder Number Three knows so much about the Academy's layout and secrets...\* Li Miaozen nodded in realisation, smiling:

"Sir Xu is also passionate and righteous."

Her attitude shifted, seemingly developing some affection for Xu Qi'an as well.

\*... If I shout "Damn Emperor Yuanjing!" now, Number Two's favorability might explode.\*

After chatting a bit more, they parted ways. One continued forward, the other turned back.

Li Miaozen found a secluded alley, took out the wine jug, removed the sealing charm, and released Susu. Then she flicked out a paper figure for her to possess.

The paper figure transformed into the exquisitely made-up Susu, who looked at Li Miaozen with grievance, "Master..."

Li Miaozen stared at her, asking, "What did you tell him?"

Xu Qi'an could identify her as a Daoist disciple, clearly having interrogated Susu.

Susu raised her hand, thumb and pinky together, indicating, "Just a little bit."

"How much is a little?"

"A little means a little."

"Speak!"

"Not much, just your identity, age, cultivation, and experience in the world..."

"?"

A big question mark appeared in Li Miaozen's mind:

"You told him everything."

"At least I didn't tell him about your menstruation days."

"..."

...

Xu Qi'an returned to the station and saw Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng still sitting there, staring at each other with eyes full of distrust.

"Why didn't you tell me about your connection with Susu?"

"You didn't mention it either."

Seeing Xu Qi'an return, Song Tingfeng looked at him with vacant eyes, "Ningyan, did you already know Susu's identity?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then why didn't you tell us?" Zhu Guangxiao asked in a deep voice.

"You two asked me to keep it a secret." Xu Qi'an shrugged.

The looks from Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were immediately filled with distrust.

"Then what happened with Susu in the teahouse..." Song Tingfeng asked quietly.

"It was all your imagination!" Xu Qi'an answered truthfully.

"Phew..." Both of them sighed in relief, realising it was just an illusion.

Song Tingfeng laughed with a sense of relief, "An illusion, that's fine. I was just confused and passed out."

Xu Qi'an looked at them with pity and shook his head, "You fell under an illusion spell, but you did not pass out."

"Didn't pass out?" Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng felt a chill in their hearts.

Xu Qi'an walked over to a pillar and said seriously, "Tingfeng, at that time, you were like this..."

He hugged the pillar and began crazily bumping against it.

Song Tingfeng: "..."

"And Guangxiao, you were like this..." Xu Qi'an moved to the table, placed his hands on the edge, and started making exaggerated movements with his waist.

Zhu Guangxiao: "..."

"Eh, why are you two crawling under the table?" Xu Qi'an finished and noticed that Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng had crawled under the table and refused to come out.

"Xu Ningyan, get lost... please go, just leave. I don't want to see you today." Song Tingfeng crouched under the table, holding his head.

"Hahahahaha..."

## Chapter 212. The Return

\*Niceee...\* Xu Qi'an felt refreshed as he went upstairs, leaving his two colleagues some time to reflect in peace.

"I should be under the carriage, not inside it, watching how sweet you two are... Kukuku, hahaha!" He laughed wildly while going upstairs.

"You bastard, Xu Ningyan!"

Behind him came the angry roars of Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, filled with shame and indignation.

In the following days, Xu Qi'an experienced the aftermath of their little boat of friendship overturning. Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao gave him the cold shoulder, treating him as if he were invisible.

When Xu Qi'an tried to engage them in conversation, they acted as if they didn't hear him and continued with their tasks.

\*Are they embarrassed and too ashamed to talk to me, or are they blaming me? It must be the former...\* Xu Qi'an thought.

So, during lunch, Xu Qi'an proactively started, "I've already forgotten about what happened in the teahouse. I won't laugh at you anymore."

"What?" Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were enraged.

\*Lady Susu toyed with our emotions, and you toyed with our friendship. Who's the real victim here?\*

"You two lost control and fell for that demon's illusion. How's that my fault?" Xu Qi'an looked at them indignantly, "Why should I have revealed it to you? Do you think if I had exposed it right then, you wouldn't have jumped off a building? See, if it weren't for Lady Flying Swallow, this would've been covered up nicely."

"No one would be embarrassed. Guangxiao wouldn't know that Tingfeng used his little brother to bang against a pillar for a quarter of an hour, and Tingfeng, you wouldn't know about Guangxiao's impressive waist strength while propping up the table."

"Stop, stop..." Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao covered their faces.

In fact, if he had exposed it at the time, Old Song and Old Zhu would've been embarrassed for a while, but not to the point of feeling so ashamed that they wished to disappear from the world.

Every time they remembered the things they said and the feelings they showed in front of Xu Ningyan—things like "I won't marry anyone but her," or "It'll be a lifelong regret"—Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao felt like committing seppuku to escape this dark world.

Song Tingfeng turned his face away, sneering, "I don't have a friend like you. From that day on, we're through."

Zhu Guangxiao said in a deep voice, "Me too."

"Don't be like that. The bond between the three of us can't be shaken by a mere female ghost." Seeing their cold faces, Xu Qi'an, looking pained, said, "At worst, I'll treat you to the Jiaofangsi when we get back to the capital."

Song Tingfeng scoffed, "You think you can buy us off with a mere Jiaofangsi?"

Xu Qi'an said seriously, "Twice."

Song Tingfeng snorted, "Get lost. Don't talk to me."

Xu Qi'an, with a twang in his heart said, "Three times."

Song Tingfeng: "Heh."

Xu Qi'an gritted his teeth, "Five times!"

Song Tingfeng clutched his sleeve tightly, "Then you better write a contract."

After three days of the friendship boat being overturned, it finally got back on track. Brothers couldn't really fall out over such a minor conflict. Treating them to the Jiaofangsi was just a way to give everyone an out; the main reason was that their friendship was genuine... as Song Tingfeng said.

Xu Qi'an wholeheartedly agreed and said, "Then let's forget about the Jiaofangsi."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao said in unison, "Cut off our ties!"

As they spoke, they waved the written note in their hands.

"And one more thing..." Zhu Guangxiao glanced at him, "You can't tell anyone about Susu... that female ghost. Not a word to anyone."

"And you can't use it to make fun of us," Song Tingfeng added.

"No problem. I absolutely, absolutely won't... hehe..." Xu Qi'an quickly turned his head, covering his face. After a few seconds, he turned back, "Absolutely won't make fun of you."

"Why were you laughing just now?"

"I wasn't laughing."

"You were."

"I really wasn't. I've undergone strict training. No matter how funny it is, I won't laugh."

...

The military encampment, just outside Baidi City.

Inside a military tent, Li Miaozen listened to Susu's report: "Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao spend most of their time at the courier station. Occasionally, when they get tired of the food there, they go out to find a restaurant.

"They usually go together. Xu Qi'an doesn't join them; he acts alone. Every time he goes out, he heads to the Goulan.

"He almost always spends an hour at the Goulan each day before returning to the station. During this period, he hasn't visited any government offices or investigated Zhou Min's case.

"Hmm, Zhou Min's grave shows signs of having been disturbed. Based on the timing, it appears it happened on the day the Inspector's team arrived in Baidi City...."

For the past few days, Susu had been acting as a lookout, monitoring every movement at the station. Whenever Xu Qi'an and his group left, she would secretly follow them.

Martial artists cannot sense Yin energy, nor can they see ghosts. As long as she kept a proper distance, Susu wouldn't be detected.

"Any other abnormalities?" Li Miaozen asked.

\*Abnormalities? That Xu Qi'an picking up silver every day—does that count as abnormal...\* Susu muttered inwardly. However, she knew Li Miaozen was asking about Zhou Min-related incidents, so she shook her head:

"No, they seem to be waiting for the Inspector to return before investigating Zhou Min's case."

The matter of Wei Yuan impeaching Yang Chuannan, the Governor-General of Yunzhou, had long been communicated by the Qi clique. Everyone in the Yunzhou officialdom knew why the Inspector's team had come.

Li Miaozen uncorked a porcelain bottle and summoned a ghostly scholar, a tall and thin middle-aged man.

"I'll speak, you write."

"Yes, Master."

With the information Li Miaozen had obtained through the internal network of the Heaven and Earth Society, she believed she had a clear understanding of Xu Qi'an. He was known for being very skilled at solving cases and had a wealth of experience.

If he had any clues or a clear direction, he certainly wouldn't be dawdling at the post station for so many days. After all, the longer the case drags on, the fewer clues remain.

This meant Xu Qi'an was also at a loss.

Before long, a letter was written. Li Miaozen handed it to Susu: "Take this letter to Yang Chuannan."

"Got it!" Susu took the letter and sashayed out of the tent.

She paused in front of the thick curtain, turned back with a pitiful expression: (?????)

"If you have something to say, just say it." Li Miaozen said impatiently.

"Aren't you going to avenge me? That stinky boy humiliated me." Susu complained indignantly.

"He just locked you up for a day." Li Miaozen waved her hand, refusing her ghostly subordinate's request.

Women are petty, and the prettier they are, the pettier they become. This was something Li Miaozen could never understand.

She preferred the life of drinking heavily, eating heartily, leading soldiers to suppress bandits, and seeking quick revenge. To put it bluntly, she had the mentality of a straightforward man.

"Hmph." Susu stormed off in a huff.

...

The largest restaurant in Qingping County, around Baidi City.

Today, the restaurant was reserved for a private event. As the final stop of the inspection tour, a lavish lunch was prepared.

After lunch, Inspector General Zhang, Yang Chuannan, and Song Changfu, along with more than a dozen high-ranking officials from Yunzhou, gathered in a private room to share their thoughts on the inspection tour.

Inspector Zhang seized the opportunity to unleash his fury, berating the officials for being ineffectual and allowing the banditry to flourish, resulting in an increase in refugees and a decline in the people's livelihood in Yunzhou.

"Inspector's words make me feel deeply ashamed," said Administrator Song with a look of remorse.

"According to confidential reports, the banditry in Yunzhou is being secretly supported, with military supplies being smuggled in," Inspector Zhang said pointedly.

"Some people, while receiving the Emperor's stipend, are engaged in treasonous activities."

The officials subtly glanced at Yang Chuannan, the silent Military Commander, without speaking up for him. Instead, they each expressed their support for Inspector Zhang's thorough investigation.

Yang Chuannan remained impassive, sitting like a mountain, allowing the officials to speak their veiled accusations.

The trend of isolating and suppressing Yang Chuannan within the Yunzhou officialdom had taken root during the inspection.

At this moment, a general knocked and entered. He was one of Yang Chuannan's trusted aides. He coldly scanned the officials, handed a confidential letter to Yang Chuannan, and then turned and left.

Yang Chuannan read the letter, and a smile broke out on his previously stern face. He put away the letter and said with a cheerful tone, "I also support the Inspector. We must investigate thoroughly and show no leniency. With the Inspector's capable subordinates, I believe the truth will come to light quickly."

Inspector Zhang frowned, his gaze falling on the letter in Yang Chuannan's hand. The other officials also speculated about the contents of the letter, wondering what had suddenly bolstered Yang Chuannan's confidence.

On the way back to Baidi City, Inspector Zhang lifted the curtain of his carriage and coughed loudly.

Up ahead, Jiang Lyuzhong turned and slowed his horse to match the carriage's pace.

"I have a bad feeling..." Inspector Zhang said, looking at the Gold Gong who had contributed little to the investigation.

"Is it because Yang Chuannan suddenly seems emboldened?" Jiang Lyuzhong nodded in understanding.

Inspector Zhang nodded. This inspection was a prelude and a test to isolate the Yunzhou officialdom in preparation for arresting Yang Chuannan. If the officials were united, he would need to plan carefully. If not, he would isolate Yang Chuannan and gain the support of the officials.

Inspector Zhang was confident in this plan because, during the initial banquet upon arriving in Yunzhou, Song had subtly hinted at certain information.

Everything had gone smoothly. With Song's cooperation, Inspector Zhang signaled their intention to target Yang Chuannan, forcing the officials to choose sides.

But after receiving that letter, Yang Chuannan seemed suddenly confident, even joking with him.

\*What backing does he have now...\* Inspector Zhang rubbed his temples.

"No matter what, Inspector, as long as you handle the official matters, I will take care of the military side, and Xu Qi'an will handle the investigation," Jiang Lyuzhong reassured, holding the reins.

Inspector Zhang nodded thoughtfully. "We can only hope that Ningyan cracks the case soon and finds the evidence Zhou Min left behind."

"That cryptic message from Zhou Min is maddening," Jiang Lyuzhong cursed.

Inspector Zhang's mood darkened further.

The group arrived back in Baidi City before dusk. In the golden sunset, Inspector Zhang led his entourage towards the post station.

Curfew had just started, clearing the streets. However, unlike in the capital, the curfew did not apply to the highest-ranking official in Yunzhou.

The station staff had been notified of Inspector Zhang's return and were bustling to prepare dinner.

The carriages stopped at the post station entrance. Inspector Zhang stepped down onto the wooden stool placed by his attendants, greeted by the waiting Bronze Gongs, including Xu Qi'an and his group.

Inspector Zhang, still troubled by Yang Chuannan's reaction, was startled when he saw Xu Qi'an:

"What happened to you?"

Xu Qi'an's eyes were bloodshot, with dark circles so pronounced they appeared almost swollen. He looked as if he could collapse at any moment.

Jiang Lyuzhong strode over, examining Xu Qi'an closely: "How many days?"

"Fifteen days," Xu Qi'an replied, frustrated.

"...", Jiang Lyuzhong gasped. "How are you holding up?"

"Just barely, I might drop dead any moment," Xu Qi'an joked.

\*That means he's not at his limit yet. This kid's mental resilience is impressive. Once he advances to the Refining Spirit realm, his mental strength will skyrocket.\*

After their brief reunion, Inspector Zhang couldn't help but ask, "Ningyan, any progress on Zhou Min's code?"

"I've got the ledger," Xu Qi'an said calmly.

Inspector Zhang remained composed, nodding. "Don't lose heart. We'll crack the code eventually..."

He suddenly paused, staring silently at Xu Qi'an.

Chapter 213. Wanted

\*The Code has been Cracked?!\*

At that moment, Inspector Zhang almost wanted to clean out his ears to confirm they weren't clogged with earwax.

In the Inspector's plan, Zhou Min's case was obscure and difficult, with no other clues apart from the code, making the investigation exceedingly challenging. He was prepared for a long, drawn-out battle, willing to stay in Yunzhou even if it meant not returning to the capital before spring, determined to pursue the case to the end.

However, he never expected that before the long battle even began, the evidence would be in hand. This signalled the nearing end of the Zhou Min case and the Yunzhou mission.

This meant Yang Chuannan was finished.

Inspector Zhang took a deep breath, looking at Xu Qi'an as if seeing him for the first time.

He had to admit that he had still underestimated this young Bronze Gong. Despite Duke Wei's recognition and Xu Qi'an's demonstrated abilities, he had given him the utmost confidence. Yet now he realised he still didn't fully understand him.

This young man is destined for greatness.

With the fifteen days of intense effort as a backdrop, Jiang Lyuzhong felt only relief at the case's progress, believing it was an achievement within Xu Qi'an's capabilities, without a dramatic emotional reaction. He had just one thought:

*\*Xu Qi'an has the makings of a Gold Gong.\**

More accurately, his potential to become a Gold Gong had become even more solid. Previously, it was a fifty-fifty chance; now it was seventy-thirty.

Inspector Zhang calmed his excitement and joy, nodding steadily. "Come with me."

He led the way, leaving the others behind, entering the hall, and going upstairs to his room.

No one else followed except Xu Qi'an and Jiang Lyuzhong.

"Did you get the evidence?"

Once Xu Qi'an closed the door, the Inspector's calm and composed demeanour vanished. He looked directly at him, unable to hide his excitement and anticipation.

Xu Qi'an pulled the ledger from his coat and handed it over.

Inspector Zhang eagerly took it but didn't open it in haste. After taking a deep breath and suppressing all his emotions, he began to read the ledger.

"Shocking, absolutely shocking... such a vast amount. Yang Chuannan deserves death," Inspector Zhang said, clutching the ledger tightly after reading it.

*\*...The Inspector really lives up to being a scholar. It took me ages to grasp the gist of it.\** Xu Qi'an, in an admiring tone, asked, "How vast is this amount?"

Inspector Zhang glanced at him, seemingly not hearing, repeating, "Shocking, absolutely shocking..."

...Xu Qi'an understood. The amount was vast, but don't ask—if you ask, it's just shocking.

Inspector Zhang solemnly put away the ledger, coughed, and asked, "How did you crack the code?"

“This is the brilliant part,” Xu Qi’an immediately detailed the process of cracking the code, not forgetting to credit his two socially embarrassed colleagues:

“Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao also played important roles. They not only actively participated in the decryption but even risked their reputations, sacrificing greatly, which was truly touching.”

“Risked their reputations?” The Inspector was taken aback.

“Yes, while out yesterday, a resentful spirit blocked our way. Fortunately, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao bravely fought it off...” Xu Qi’an said earnestly.

“The Church of the Warlock God is skilled in raising and controlling ghosts. Hmm, it seems there are warlocks hiding in Baidi City,” Jiang Lyuzhong noted with raised eyebrows.

Xu Qi’an nodded, feeling it was reasonable for the Church of the Warlock God to take the blame, and asked:

“Inspector, what are your next steps?”

Inspector Zhang stroked his beard with a smile. “Speed is of the essence!”

Then, changing his tone, he added, “But no rush. Let's eat first and discuss later.”

...

Inspector Zhang, adhering to the rule of not speaking during meals, called over Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao after finishing lunch. Looking at the two Bronze Gongs, the Inspector gently said:

“I heard from Ningyan that you both made significant contributions during the investigation.”

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao immediately glanced at Xu Qi’an, feeling touched. It was clear that Xu Ningyan had spoken on their behalf in front of the Inspector.

Merits are a valuable thing, primarily affecting promotions. Additionally, after completing the Yunzhou mission, the yamen would reward individuals based on their contributions, often with substantial bonuses.

\*...What a good brother!\*

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were deeply moved.

“This is our duty, to alleviate the Inspector's burdens and to serve the court with unwavering loyalty,” Song Tingfeng said with a cheerful smile.

The usually silent Zhu Guangxiao nodded vigorously.

Inspector Zhang nodded approvingly, and with concern, asked, “I heard from Ningyan that during the investigation, you sacrificed yourselves to combat the resentful spirits obstructing the case. Is this true?”

...The expressions of gratitude on Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao's faces instantly vanished, turning rigid.

"Why aren't you speaking?"

"Sir... it was a minor issue, not worth troubling you," Song Tingfeng forced a smile.

Inspector Zhang shook his head and said gently, "Once the matter is resolved, I will write a report. Everyone's contributions will be recorded and submitted to the court, and merits will be rewarded accordingly."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao's faces turned pale, "Inspector, it's not that we don't want to tell, it's just... just that our spirits were injured by the resentful ghost, making our memories hazy. We can't remember the details."

In perfect synchronisation, they both covered their faces and waved their hands, "Can't remember, can't remember..."

....

After dinner, Jiang Lyuzhong and Inspector Zhang led a group of 130 people, including the Nightwatchers and Huben Guards, towards the Commander's residence.

They were fully equipped with swords, spears, bows, crossbows, and even firearms, ready for any resistance from Commander Yang Chuannan.

Inspector Zhang had planned the arrest for nighttime to catch the opponent off guard and to surprise the entire Yunzhou officialdom, leaving them no time to respond.

Along the way, they encountered two patrols, but the Inspector overpowered them with a stronger stance. Amidst the clanking of armor, the arresting party arrived at Yang Chuannan's residence.

Jiang Lyuzhong, sitting on horseback, waved his hand.

A Silver Gong dismounted, walked briskly to the gate, and with a slight crouch and some stored strength, punched out.

Boom!

The heavy gate instantly shattered, sending splinters flying.

The Nightwatchers led the charge into the residence, shouting, "Inspector Zhang is handling a case, anyone obstructing will be killed without mercy!"

The guards at Yang Chuannan's residence, all seasoned soldiers, were unruly and unafraid of the Inspector, drawing their swords to fight the Nightwatchers.

"Damn, these bastards have been bullying Yunzhou for too long?" A Silver Gong sneered, drawing his sword.

There were also experts in the Commander's residence who quickly engaged the Silver Gongs.

"Stop!"

As the shout echoed, Yang Chuannan emerged in a robe, repelling two Silver Gongs with a single punch, saving several guards.

“Hmph!”

Jiang Lyuzhong, who had been watching, stepped forward, extending his five fingers toward Yang Chuannan. His thick knuckles and glowing skin resembled bronze, not flesh.

An overpowering force enveloped Yang Chuannan. With Jiang Lyuzhong’s clenched fist, he was forcibly pulled through the air.

Fist intent exploded!

The Gold Gong’s punch struck Yang Chuannan’s chest with a resonating boom, as if a giant bell had rung. Everyone saw the divine light on Yang Chuannan’s body flicker and then shatter into fragments.

The bronze skin and iron bones was broken.

Yang Chuannan, vomiting blood, flew horizontally.

“Sir!”

The guards, with bloodshot eyes, gripped their swords, ready to fight to the death with the intruders.

“Stop, stop...” Yang Chuannan staggered up, dishevelled and unsteady.

Inspector Zhang appeared timely, looking at the dishevelled Commander, and said in a deep voice, “Master Yang, please restrain your subordinates.”

Yang Chuannan staggered forward, staring at Inspector Zhang, and sneered, “I am a second-rank official. Inspector Zhang, you led a team into my residence at night, wielding weapons... I want to hear your reason.”

“So you can understand clearly,” Inspector Zhang would not reveal the evidence publicly, and said in a deep voice:

“I have obtained Zhou Min’s ledger.”

Yang Chuannan’s eyes widened instantly, “Impossible!”

Inspector Zhang sneered, “Master Yang, please accompany me to the inn. You will know then.”

With that, he shouted, “Take him away. Anyone obstructing will be executed!”

The guards stepped forward, ready to fight, but Yang Chuannan stopped them, knowing that obstructing an Inspector and freeing a ‘criminal’ was a capital offense.

Yang Chuannan did not doubt the Nightwatchers’ decisiveness or the Gold Gong’s combat prowess. He didn’t want his men to die in vain.

Immediately, the Huben Guards stepped forward, shackling Yang Chuannan and escorting him out.

The group of 130 people left the Commander’s residence in a grand procession.

...

A military tent outside Baidi city.

“What? The Nightwatchers broke into Yang's mansion at night and took away the Commander?” Li Miaozen stood up in shock, glaring at the black-clad ghost that had returned to report. This ghost was her spy in Yang Chuannan's mansion, replaced every three days since ghosts would dissipate without nourishment from yin energy.

Sitting at the bedside, Susu swung her legs and said in a coquettish voice, “Is the Inspector so bold? Arresting someone without evidence? Even though he is the highest-ranking official in Baidi City right now, how dare he touch Master Yang without any proof.

“Master, I suggest we gather three thousand troops, storm the inn, and hang that Bronze Gong named Xu at the city gate.”

Li Miaozen, having calmed down, gave her a sidelong glance, “Hmm, good idea. I'll appoint you as the general of the vanguard.”

Susu shrank her head back, “Let's stick to the laws of the Great Feng.”

“Get lost.”

“Okay.” Susu pouted and left the tent, feeling wronged.

“Come back!” Li Miaozen called out.

“Alright, Master.” Susu's beautiful face brightened instantly, revealing a sweet smile.

“Are you sure that Xu Qi'an didn't secretly investigate and obtain any supposed evidence?” Li Miaozen asked, her eyes suspiciously fixed on Susu.

“No, no.” Susu shook her head vigorously, her delicate body trembling, her skirt fluttering.

“What about the others?”

“I was only tasked with watching Xu Qi'an and his two colleagues. I didn't pay attention to the other Nightwatchers.”

Li Miaozen nodded. As long as Xu Qi'an wasn't secretly investigating, the others could be ignored. Whether or not he noticed Susu's surveillance was unimportant.

Li Miaozen was only concerned with what Xu Qi'an had been doing these past three days. If he had not been investigating and had no breakthrough, it didn't matter if he noticed the surveillance.

If it wasn't Xu Qi'an who obtained the "evidence," what was the Inspector's reason and purpose for arresting Yang Chuannan?

Trying to use force to extract a confession?

No, a dignified Inspector wouldn't do something so foolish.

“Come!” Li Miaozen shouted.

A guard on night duty outside the tent responded and entered.

"Gather the troops. We'll enter the city at dawn."

"Yes!"

Then, she looked at Susu, "You will accompany me. We'll enter the city tonight. I need to visit the Inspector."

Chapter 214. Xu Qi'an: I Didn't Do It

In a room inside the station.

"Yang Chuannan, you and the Qi Clique, led by the former Minister of Industry, colluded with the Church of the Warlock God, secretly supported mountain bandits, provided them with military supplies, and kept the bandits to enhance your own power. What is your ultimate intention?"

Inspector Zhang, with a stern expression, harshly threw the ledger, hitting Yang Chuannan in the face.

The ledger fell to the ground, pages fluttering open. Yang Chuannan glanced at it, his expression changing slightly.

Jiang Lyuzhong bent down to pick up the ledger, glanced at Inspector Zhang without much expression, thinking that if Yang Chuannan had kicked it, the hard-found evidence might have been lost. Fortunately, he had severely injured Yang Chuannan earlier. With his heart meridians damaged, Yang Chuannan was no different from an ordinary person for a short time, perhaps even weaker.

"If you want to condemn someone, you can always find a pretext," Yang Chuannan said coldly. He wore shackles and handcuffs, sitting on the bedside with a defeated aura.

"Lord Yang, there's no need for such high-sounding words," said Xu Qi'an, the only person in the room with the status of a Bronze Gong.

The Sitianjian Arcanists also had no rank, but they were different.

"You found this ledger?" Yang Chuannan stared at him.

On the second day the Inspector's team arrived in Yunzhou, Li Miaozhen had informed him that a Bronze Gong named Xu Qi'an was a key figure in this team. She even said that Yang Chuannan's fate was partly in the hands of this Bronze Gong.

Yang Chuannan had taken Li Miaozhen's words to heart and did not underestimate this Bronze Gong named Xu Qi'an. But he never expected that before he could take any action, the young Bronze Gong had already sealed his fate.

It was completely unexpected!

"Yes, I did," Xu Qi'an nodded.

"Impressive, impressive..." Yang Chuannan shook his head and laughed, "Indeed, heroes emerge from the youth. When Miaozhen told me about you, although I didn't underestimate you, I still ended up being careless."

\*No, it wasn't just you. I did too...\* Inspector Zhang silently agreed in his heart. No one had expected Xu Qi'an to be this competent.

Yang Chuannan examined Xu Qi'an, "Trying to reach Refining Spirit?"

"Yep!" Xu Qi'an nodded, thinking that, after all, this Commander was more perceptive than Number Two, who had suspected him of being an overindulgent lecher. It seemed that no matter the time or place, dark circles were always misunderstood.

Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong stood with their hands behind their backs, not urging or interrupting, showing the utmost respect to Xu Qi'an.

"Lord Yang, you are a member of the Qi Clique, correct?" After a few casual words, Xu Qi'an went straight to the point, taking over the interrogation from Inspector Zhang.

Yang Chuannan nodded, "My father was from Qi, and during his time in the Ministry of War, he was supported by the then Vice Minister of War and joined the Qi Clique."

Xu Qi'an looked blankly at Inspector Zhang.

Inspector Zhang explained, "The Qi Clique is a faction composed of people from Qi. During Yang Chuannan's father's time, the Qi Clique controlled the Ministry of War. That was decades ago."

Yang Chuannan continued, "My father was always a marginalised figure in the Qi Clique. When it came to my generation, it was the same. Until I was transferred to Yunzhou, where I slowly climbed to my current position over the past decade with repeated military achievements.

"Indeed, the Qi Clique in the court played a role in my advancement, but I am not close to them. Apart from my annual reports in the capital, Yunzhou and the capital are thousands of miles apart. We only maintain some minor connections."

Inspector Zhang nodded slightly.

Yang Chuannan had climbed the ranks through military achievements, which made the charge of fostering bandits for personal gain credible and matched the Nightwatchers' evaluation of him.

"But to say that I supplied military goods for the Qi Clique and colluded with the Church of the Warlock God is truly an injustice," Yang Chuannan shook his head, "I am already the Commander. Is there a higher position in Yunzhou than mine? If I weren't trying to do something for the people of Yunzhou, I would rather be transferred out of this cursed place."

\*These words sounded very noble and righteous, like an attempt to clear his name in those movies I watched in my previous life...\* Xu Qi'an sneered inwardly. He didn't believe a word, only the evidence in hand.

However, as a qualified interrogator, he knew how to guide the conversation. He followed up, "According to Lord Yang, is there more to this matter?"

Yang Chuannan looked at Inspector Zhang, "Does the Inspector think that I am the only Qi Clique member in Yunzhou? If the Qi Clique colluded with the Church of the Warlock God and supplied military goods, is the mastermind necessarily me?"

"Is there only one Qi Clique member in the central military command?"

Inspector Zhang shook his head, "Commander, this doesn't look good."

This all sounded like Yang Chuannan's excuse, and it was indeed just that. Excuses without evidence, an attempt to shirk responsibility.

And as the military commander, if the office were caught smuggling supplies to mountain bandits, who would be the one responsible? Naturally the highest ranked official in charge.

This point was beyond doubt.

"Lord Yang, you have a traitor among your ranks," Xu Qi'an also thought he was making excuses but refrained from jumping to conclusions.

Yang Chuannan seemed to see through their distrust. After a pause, he said, "The Qi Clique indeed engaged in such activities, but it wasn't until Zhou Min's death that I began to piece together the entire picture.

"Clearly, I am being used as a scapegoat by the Qi Clique. The real colluders with the Church of the Warlock God and supporters of the mountain bandits are others. I intended to secretly find and destroy the evidence to protect myself, but you were a step ahead."

\*A step ahead? I hadn't even left the fountain, and you were already pushing the high ground...\* Xu Qi'an turned to look at the two white-robed arcanists.

The three arcanists, who had mostly been bystanders for half a month, finally had a role to play. They had been using their qi-watching technique on Yang Chuannan.

"He doesn't seem to be lying," one of the white-robed arcanists replied.

"Seems?" Xu Qi'an stared at him, displeased.

Being questioned by Master Xu made the arcanists anxious. They hurriedly explained, "We are sixth rank Masters of Feng-shui, and this Commander is fifth rank. In theory, our qi-watching technique should not fail.

"However, this is not an absolute certainty. First, if Lord Yang has been diligently training his spirit and has a strong will, we wouldn't be able to detect his lies. For example, once you, Master Xu, reach the Refining Spirit stage, ordinary eighth rank arcanists wouldn't be able to see through you. It would require someone of the same rank or higher.

"Second, there are artefacts that can block aura, but Lord Yang has already been searched and has no such artefacts.

"Lastly, both the Church of the Warlock God and we arcanists have memory-altering spells. If Lord Yang had prepared in advance, then what he's saying now would indeed be true."

"Memory alteration?" Xu Qi'an was shocked.

This was the first time he had heard of memory alteration.

"That's a spell mastered only by high-rank experts," the white-robed arcanists explained.

Considering the vast gap between high-rank and low-rank experts in this world, Xu Qi'an understood. Low-rank experts were akin to mortals, while high-rank ones were comparable to gods and demons. The monk Shenshu within him was an example—sealed in Sangpo for five hundred years with severed limbs, yet still unextinguished.

\*Right, there's still Master Shenshu within me... I almost forgot about him...\* Xu Qi'an mentally sighed.

This monk, severely weakened after five hundred years of imprisonment, was recuperating by borrowing his body, having slept until now.

\*If it was memory alteration, then the case would be tough... Regular investigative methods wouldn't work... Only those of the same or higher cultivation could deal with this... I should have asked for Song Qing or the master of posturing to accompany us, instead of three mere Masters of Feng-shui...\* Xu Qi'an frowned.

Yang Chuannan stared at Xu Qi'an, "Sir Xu... With your skills, you deserve to be called Sir Xu by me. Whether I'm telling the truth or not, you might as well investigate.

"Heh, this is a last-resort plan for me."

\*Using the enemy to defeat the enemy\*... Xu Qi'an thought irritably.

"Why should I help you? I could just take you back to the capital, and the matter would be over," Xu Qi'an sneered.

"That works too!" Yang Chuannan closed his eyes.

...

Beginning that day, the courier station began a three-shift watch. Regardless of day or night, no one could leave nor enter the station without the permission of the inspector general.

The Huben Guards were in high spirits because the main culprit had been apprehended, signaling that their return to the capital was near.

The South truly was a dreadful place: cold and damp, with the wind chilling one to the bone during night watch.

Although the northern cold was several times worse, those accustomed to northern life found the southern dampness unbearable.

"Sir Xu is truly a remarkable person. How many days has he been in Yunzhou? Barely half a fortnight, and he has already cracked such a major case."

"Heh, it's not surprising. We had heard of his fame back in the capital. The Sangpo case caused such a stir, and wasn't it also solved by him?"

"Indeed, once we return to the capital, he will undoubtedly become a prominent figure again. We should get closer to him during our journey back, so he can be a pillar of support for us in the future."

The Huben Guards were proud, chatting and praising Sir Xu's brilliance in solving cases while on duty.

The more ambitious ones were already contemplating how to forge ties with Sir Xu while he was still a Bronze Gong. The stronger the bond now, the more valuable it would become as his status rose.

No need for deep friendship; just ensuring he remembered their names would be enough.

"Don't kid yourself. Someone like you, who likes to pocket small bribes, won't be favoured by Sir Xu. Let me tell you, Sir Xu detests evil. Back in the capital, he nearly beheaded a superior who was bullying women."

"Bah, and you think Sir Xu would favour someone like you, who frequents brothels?"

As they chatted, they suddenly noticed a figure at the station's entrance.

"Who's there?"

The on-duty Tiger Guard gripped his sword and shouted sternly.

At the entrance stood Li Miaozhen, wearing soft armour and a high ponytail. Her beautiful, oval face was stern, and the cold wind fluttered her ponytail, giving her a heroic aura.

"Li Miaozhen, General of the light cavalry, requests an audience with the Inspector," Li Miaozhen called out loudly.

"Let her in," came Jiang Lyuzhong's deep voice.

The Tiger Guards stepped aside, and Li Miaozhen nodded slightly before stepping into the courtyard. After a few steps, she turned back and said, "Why are you dawdling? Keep up."

A few seconds later, an extraordinarily beautiful woman reluctantly walked over, moving hesitantly. "Master, this place is full of detestable warriors. Their strong life force is burning me all over."

In the military camp, Susu mostly stayed inside Li Miaozhen's tent, rarely going out. While the camp was tolerable, the station felt like a volcano to her.

The vigorous life force of a fourth rank martial artist was too much for spirits to bear.

Li Miaozhen pulled out a talisman, flicked her finger, and stuck it on Susu's chest.

She immediately cheered up, bouncing into the courtyard, no longer afraid of the overwhelming life force.

"Master, let me tell you, two nightwatchers here are quite infatuated with me," she chirped.

Crossing the courtyard and entering the hall, Li Miaozhen saw Inspector Zhang, Jiang Lyuzhong, and Xu Qi'an. The other Nightwatchers were not in the hall.

Li Miaozhen stood straight in the hall, clasping her fists. "Inspector, do you have evidence for arresting Commander Yang Chuannan?"

"Are you referring to this?" Jiang Lyuzhong raised the account book in his hand.

"Conclusive evidence," Inspector Zhang said warmly, smiling.

Li Miaozhen immediately looked at Xu Qi'an, her expression complex, and asked, "Did you do this?"

Other than Xu Qi'an, who else could have found the time to investigate while the rest, including Jiang Lyuzhong, were busy inspecting the local situation?

This was not what Li Miaozhen had expected. She had come to test the waters. If Inspector Zhang had arrested Yang Chuannan without evidence, she planned to use the military to pressure him into releasing Yang Chuannan.

However, if the evidence was real, rescuing Yang Chuannan would be incredibly difficult.

"I didn't do it," Xu Qi'an shook his head, then added, "but I found it."

## Chapter 215. Shock

\*As expected, the so-called "evidence" was found by Xu Qi'an...\*

For some reason, Li Miaozhen was not surprised by this result. She coldly glanced at the female spirit Susu beside her.

Susu pretended not to see, engrossed in playing with a lock of her hair.

The female spirit was also puzzled. She had assured her that he was slacking off, but the fact was undeniable: this little Bronze Gong had obtained the evidence right under her nose.

Li Miaozhen took a deep breath. "Inspector General, there are hidden truths in this case..."

Inspector Zhang waved his hand, interrupting her. His tone was indifferent as he said, "General Li, you are merely a cavalry General and not a court official. You have no authority to interfere in court matters.

"Out of respect for your efforts in quelling the bandits, I allowed you into the courier station."

"Ahem!"

Xu Qi'an coughed loudly, drawing the attention of the three present. "Inspector, why not hear her out?"

He believed that Number Two supporting Yang Chuannan might be influenced by personal feelings, but she was not a blind or ignorant person. Therefore, he wanted to hear what she had to say.

Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong exchanged glances. "Alright!"

Li Miaozhen nodded at Xu Qi'an, pondered for a few seconds, and then said, "I have known Yang Chuannan for more than a year, and we have fought bandits together several times, forging a close relationship. But I am not someone who cannot distinguish between right and wrong, and I understand the treachery and changeability of human hearts.

"I trust Yang Chuannan not only because of our interactions and shared battles. When I learned through secret channels that the court had dispatched an inspector to Yunzhou to investigate Yang Chuannan, I arranged for a spirit to monitor him.

"And at that time, Yang Chuannan had not received any secret letters from the Qi Clique."

Hearing about the spirit monitoring, Jiang Lyuzhong raised an eyebrow.

"How did you know that the court was sending an inspector to Yunzhou to investigate Yang Chuannan?" Inspector Zhang's gaze sharpened as he stared at her.

\*Report to the Inspector: we also have a traitor among us, and that traitor is me...\* Xu Qi'an thought guiltily.

The fragments of the Earth Book could convey messages over vast distances almost instantly, so it made sense that Li Miaozhen learned about this before Yang Chuannan.

She had heeded Number Three's words and had set up surveillance.

Li Miaozhen spoke frankly, "That's my secret."

"Yang Chuannan is a fifth-rank martial artist. Your spirit monitoring him would not escape his notice," Xu Qi'an diverted the topic guiltily, finally seeing the situation develop as he had anticipated.

He had informed Number Two of the matter in advance, hoping she would assist in the investigation. Although her relationship with Yang Chuannan was beyond his expectations, the result was still satisfactory.

"So what if he knows? As long as he remains within the spirit's sight, my objective is achieved," Li Miaozen said.

Xu Qi'an nodded in agreement. It was like in his previous life, where people knew they were being monitored by street cameras but couldn't do anything about it unless they destroyed them.

If Yang Chuannan had destroyed the "monitoring," Li Miaozen would not be so adamant in defending him.

\*Does Yang Chuannan have a wife? The spirit must have seen a lot... Fortunately, Master Shenshu is asleep; otherwise, I would have become a star in the Chinese adult video industry...\* Xu Qi'an's thoughts became complicated.

"Is that all?" Jiang Lyuzhong pursued.

"I am a disciple of the Heaven Sect," Li Miaozen said word by word, "I can see through Yang Chuannan's true nature."

What does she mean? Xu Qi'an noticed that Jiang Lyuzhong was deep in thought, frowning.

"The Heaven Sect practices the unity of heaven and man. You should already know this," Li Miaozen first glanced at the traitorous female spirit Susu, then at Xu Qi'an.

The former bowed her head in shame, while the latter asked, "And then?"

Jiang Lyuzhong took over the conversation, sighing, "To achieve the unity of heaven and man, one must first detach from emotions. As the saying goes, 'Heaven and Earth are unkind, treating all things as straw dogs.'<sup>[1]</sup> It is said that the higher the cultivation of a Heaven Sect Daoist, the more they resemble a stone person, devoid of joy, sorrow, emotions, and desires. Even if their own child dies, they would not feel the slightest sadness."

\*Then if we have children in the future, I'll take care of them...\* Xu Qi'an instinctively glanced at Li Miaozen, who raised an eyebrow, sensing a hint of malice in the Bronze Gong's eyes.

Jiang Lyuzhong continued, "The unity of heaven and man requires understanding the changes in the rules of heaven and earth, integrating countless phenomena into oneself. Heaven Sect disciples understand the principles of investigation and knowledge better than any scholar.

"They have an exceptionally strong intuition about qualities such as good, evil, and greed."

\*Isn't that basically a human lie detector... no, a human lie detector would be the arcanists of the Sitianjian. Heaven Sect disciples should be scam detectors?\*

Xu Qi'an suddenly understood why Li Miaozen trusted Yang Chuannan so much.

"But the Sitianjian's qi-watching technique has its flaws, and your method..." Xu Qi'an hesitated.

"As a practitioner of the Heaven Sect, one must have absolute confidence in their intuition," Li Miaozen said calmly. This was a matter of the Dao heart—if one doubted their intuition, they would be doubting themselves and would eventually fall to inner demons.

"Then gauge me and see my qualities," Xu Qi'an suggested.

Li Miaozen shook her head. "Our interaction time is too short; that is a long process." She paused and then said with a smirk, "Your qualities are already written on your face."

\*You motherfu...\*

"After realizing he was caught in the whirlpool between the Qi Clique and the Church of the Warlock God, Yang Chuannan has been trying to save himself, both by investigating the Qi Clique members within the Military Command and by looking for evidence left by Zhou Min.

"If he could prove his innocence, that would be best. If not, he planned to destroy the so-called 'evidence' to protect himself," Li Miaozen candidly explained Yang Chuannan's plan.

\*...That makes sense. If it were me in this situation, I would also first protect myself... and then investigate the case based on my ability...\* Xu Qi'an nodded in agreement.

Inspector Zhang squinted, recalling Yang Chuannan's subtle hostility towards him along the way. In Yang Chuannan's eyes, he was just a troublemaker.

Xu Qi'an picked up his teacup, took a sip, and shook his head. "General Li, words alone are not enough. We have obtained evidence. Even if Yang Chuannan is not the mastermind, as the Commander, he must bear the responsibility."

Whenever an office has issues, the leader is held accountable—that has always been the rule.

"Moreover, the qi-watching technique of the Sitianjian cannot be used as evidence for those above the fourth rank, and your investigation and knowledge method cannot convince the court either."

For those above the fourth rank, the Sitianjian's qi-watching technique could not be used as evidence because the technique does not lie, but the arcanist might. Similarly, the Heaven Sect's methods do not lie, but Li Miaozen might.

Xu Qi'an stood up, walked to the female spirit Susu, and pinched her face, causing her beautiful, flawless features to sink.

"What are you doing?" Susu's face paled... or rather, her elegant features deformed.

"It's still made of paper," Xu Qi'an patted her shoulder. "Susu, would you like a living body? Not just a possession, but a true, unowned body."

"A dead person's body?" Susu gave him a sidelong glance and sneered, "A lifeless shell will rot in no time."

"No, a truly unowned body, without a soul," Xu Qi'an said.

Susu looked doubtful.

"I am an old acquaintance of Song Qing from the Sitianjian. He is working on life alchemy, with the ultimate goal of creating a body indistinguishable from a living person. He has recently made significant breakthroughs," Xu Qi'an said solemnly.

"Re- really..."

Probably due to the golden reputation of the Sitianjian, Susu began to show interest and even a certain longing.

"Of course it's true. As long as you choose to follow me, I can definitely get you a clean, unowned body. As for the issue of nurturing it with yin energy, I can find a solution."

Anyway, it's just a bluff. This is how you deceive girls.

First, paint them a big picture, make them look forward to the future, offer enough benefits and promises, and they will let you do as you please because of that distant but appealing vision.

By the time they realize it's a lie, it's too late.

"Ahem!"

Inspector Zhang coughed, reminding the Bronze Gong to stay on topic and save the flirtation with the female spirit for later.

Xu Qi'an understood his leader's intent. He had laid enough groundwork and now probed, "General Li, since you said that Yang Chuannan has been secretly investigating the situation within the Military Command, do you have any leads?"

\*If not, please leave...\*

Li Miaozhen seemed to have her response prepared. Under the candlelight, she lowered her head slightly, her long and curled eyelashes catching the light, casting a shadow over her beautiful eyes.

"Shortly after Zhou Min's death, I collaborated with Yang Chuannan to investigate the Military Command. We finally identified a target, a member of the Qi Clique. But that person was very slick; sensing danger, they went into hiding before we could close the net."

That's practically saying nothing... Aren't you very good at finding people? You even managed to catch Baihu Zhou... Xu Qi'an muttered to himself, shaking his head.

Inspector Zhang frowned and asked, "Who is this person?"

"Like Zhou Min, he was also part of the Military Command, an officer in charge of managing the storerooms and distribution," Li Miaozhen replied.

To verify the truth of Li Miaozhen's words, it was actually quite simple, just like when they exposed Yang Yingying's lies. Xu Qi'an immediately asked:

"Name, age, appearance, home address, and information about his relatives and friends... Can you provide these details, General Li?"

"Of course, but I don't have them with me. I will send someone to the station tomorrow," Li Miaozhen said. "As for his appearance, I can draw it for you."

Inspector Zhang nodded, ordering someone to fetch pen, ink, paper, and inkstone. The deformed-faced Susu obediently ground the ink but seemed distracted, occasionally glancing at Xu Qi'an and then lowering her head in thought.

After a cup of tea's time, Li Miaozen finished the portrait.

The person was a lean middle-aged man with sharp eyes.

The owner of the dogmeat store at Ding No. 15.

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## Chapter 216. The Plot Thickens

\*Fuuu...\* Upon seeing the dog meat shop owner, Xu Qi'an's mind was filled with a mix of confusion, anger, and slight fear.

Confusion stemmed from not understanding how things turned out this way, anger from feeling insulted intellectually, and fear from realizing that if the other party had malicious intentions, he might have been caught off guard.

"This person is called Liang Youping. Unlike Zhou Min, he is a native of Yunzhou. According to Yang Chuannan, Liang Youping was recruited into the Qi Clique through his connections," Li Miaozen explained.

"An officer in the Military Command with the same authority as Zhou Min..." Inspector Zhang pondered for a moment before questioning, "Why didn't you and Yang Chuannan contact me earlier and be forthright?"

Li Miaozen sat straight, her posture unmoved from the beginning, and she replied calmly, "In the year of the Official Evaluation, interparty warfare in court is at its most intense. How could we be sure Azure cloak Wei wasn't planning to use this opportunity to uproot Qi Clique officials from various regions?"

"I represent the emperor in my role, and I am committed to my duties, to care for the people, and to severely punish corrupt officials, to not betray the trust of His Majesty and Duke Wei," Inspector Zhang said solemnly.

Li Miaozen sneered disdainfully.

\*That damn Emperor Yuanjing...\* Xu Qi'an could guess what was going through Number Two's mind at that moment.

He sighed wearily, tapped the table, and when the three of them turned their attention to him, he said in a low voice, "I know this person!"

The three were taken aback.

Xu Qi'an stared at the portrait and asked, "Is he a cripple?"

"Yes, Liang Youping fell off a cliff during a bandit raid and broke his leg," Li Miaozen replied.

\*...Nothing that guy says can be trusted, and I was actually moved at the time.\* Xu Qi'an felt an urge to curse.

He also realized his mental state was really poor because he didn't even think to use the Qi-watching Technique to check the truth of what the person said at the time.

In normal circumstances, he wouldn't make such a big oversight.

"What's going on?" Inspector Zhang couldn't help but ask.

Xu Qi'an waved his hand while pinching his eyebrows. "Inspector, my mind is a mess right now. Uh, let me go somewhere, and I'll explain it to you properly later."

Saying this, he looked at Jiang Lyuzhong, "Gold Gong Jiang, will you accompany me?"

Jiang Lyuzhong glanced at Inspector Zhang and shook his head, "Duke Wei's order is to always follow and protect the Inspector."

\*Okay, that makes sense. If we came back and found the Inspector's head taken off and kicked around like a ball, it wouldn't be fun...\* Xu Qi'an said, "Then call two Silver Gongs to accompany me and lend me thirty Huben Guards."

He didn't admit he was a bit scared; it was all for caution.

"I'll go with you!" Li Miaozen was eager to join.

Xu Qi'an immediately changed his request, "Gold Gong Jiang, I'll need three Silver Gongs."

Li Miaozen: "..."

This little Bronze Gong didn't trust her. Li Miaozen revealed a hint of feminine demeanour, glaring at him angrily.

Soon, Xu Qi'an, along with three Silver Gongs, thirty Huben Guards, Li Miaozen, and Susu, rode out of the station towards the black market on Huangbo Street.

Due to the earlier large-scale operation, the patrolling soldiers didn't stop them upon seeing the Nightwatchers' uniforms and instead made way.

The Inspector's team from the capital had the right to act on their own discretion.

Leaving the inner city, they quickly reached Huangbo Street. A group of brightly armoured Huben Guards stormed into the black market, causing the onlookers to become wary and retreat in fear.

Xu Qi'an led the team to shop No. 15, stunned to find the door tightly shut and the windows dark inside, with no lights on.

His heart sank as he gestured for the Huben Guards to surround the shop, intending to break in.

"Wait!" Li Miaozen called out.

She took a silk pouch from her waist, opened it, and wisps of green smoke floated out, slipping through the cracks in the doors and windows.

"A perfect scout," Xu Qi'an praised.

Li Miaozen responded modestly with a hum.

\*The Daoist sects are really interesting. One spirit makes three purities... Heaven, Earth, and Human each have different cultivation paths. The Earth Sect cultivates merit, the Heaven Sect

cultivates indifference, and the Human Sect does the opposite, turning a perfectly pure Daoist into a seductive fox...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself, suddenly getting an idea.

\*Heaven and Humanity Sects are like fire and water, perhaps because of their opposite cultivation paths?\*

\*And the Earth Sect, which cultivates merit, doesn't involve itself with either side, maintaining decent relationships with both, having no grudges, and exchanging pleasantries when they meet.\*

\*Otherwise, Li Miaozhen, the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, wouldn't be able to join the Heaven and Earth Society.\*

\*Sect Master Luo Yuheng wouldn't have given the golden pill to Daoist Jinlian either.\*

\*Indeed, pleasing both sides is the way to go, just like how I balance between Lin'an and Huaqing, able to charm both.\*

\*Girl-boy-girl!\*

\*Perfect.\*

Just then, those several wisps of green smoke returned and whispered by Li Miaozhen's ear for a moment before retreating back into the silk pouch.

"There is no one in the shop, and no ambush," Li Miaozhen stated.

Xu Qi'an immediately signaled his men, and with the three Silver Gongs, they broke into the shop, searching upstairs and downstairs. Everything inside was undisturbed, and nothing appeared to have been damaged.

There were even twenty taels of silver in a locked drawer, which Xu Qi'an decided to confiscate and added to his own wallet.

\*...No signs of a struggle, no traces of looting... It seemed like the owner had just temporarily left...\* Xu Qi'an found nothing in the search and led his men out of the shop, approaching the neighboring shop owner who had come out to watch the commotion.

This shop also dealt in "dog meat."

"Come here, I have some questions for you," he ordered.

The owner of shop Ding No. 16 obediently came over, keeping his head down, "Sir."

"Where did the owner of Ding No. 15 go?"

"He hasn't opened for a few days. The girls he kept in his shop have all come to me for work," the owner of Ding No. 16 answered all questions but didn't offer any extra information.

"When did it close?" Xu Qi'an asked again.

"Three days ago."

\*Three days ago... right after I left?\* Xu Qi'an's eyes flickered as he continued questioning, "The owner of Ding No. 15, is he the one with the limp?"

"Yes, but he's not the original owner."

\*...Not the original owner.\* Xu Qi'an's suspicions were confirmed, "What happened to the original owner? When did the new owner take over?"

"The shop changed hands about ten days ago. I don't know where the original owner went."

Xu Qi'an then questioned the owners of the surrounding shops, receiving similar answers. They were also surprised by the sudden change of ownership at Ding No. 15. However, the black market was a place where people were generally indifferent to others' affairs, so no one paid much attention.

On the way back, as the horses walked slowly, Xu Qi'an, for the umpteenth time, pinched his brows. Li Miaozen turned her head to look at him, her voice carrying a mature woman's magnetism, "You seem exhausted."

\*Just so you know I'm not a lecher...\* Xu Qi'an said, "General Li seems to misunderstand me, thinking I am a lustful person. Otherwise, why would you send Miss Susu to seduce me?"

"Isn't it true?"

Faced with Xu Qi'an's confrontational behavior, Li Miaozen chose to counter directly.

"I'm attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit stage. I haven't slept for a long time," Xu Qi'an explained.

He didn't specify exactly how many days.

\*Breaking through to the Refining Spirit stage?\* Li Miaozen's beautiful eyes widened slightly as she scrutinized him.

Only now did she realize she had always misunderstood. Seeing Xu Qi'an with heavy dark circles, anyone would instinctively think he was overindulgent, rather than first considering that he was attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit stage. Moreover, within the Heaven and Earth Society, hearing Number One describe Xu Qi'an as a lecher, addicted to the Jiaofangsi, solidified her impression of him as a lustful person.

\*Even if these changes were due to breaking through to the Refining Spirit stage, it didn't change the fact that you are a lecher... you will never know how well I understand you...\* Li Miaozen thought to herself.

But she was curious about how long this boy had been enduring.

Li Miaozen didn't know much about the martial artist system. After all, she had only been out training for a few years and hadn't encountered many martial artists attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit stage.

Someone as experienced as Yang Chuannan could easily see that Xu Qi'an was attempting to break through. This was the insight of someone who had been through it.

"If I remember correctly, the limit for breaking through to the Refining Spirit stage is ten days?"

"General Li doesn't seem to understand the martial artist system well."

"Why should I?"

"You don't seem to think highly of martial artists."

Li Miaozen humorously replied, "Not as if I'm the only one."

Xu Qi'an: "..."

He couldn't help but think of the proud white-robed arcanists and the Confucian scholars who also looked down on martial artists. The world's disdain hierarchy was: no one respected anyone, but everyone looked down on martial artists.

Xu Qi'an used to think the most nauseating discrimination was against sex workers and black market dealers. Now there was another, called: martial artists.

Apart from arcanists and martial artists, each major system had beings beyond the ranking system or had produced such beings in the past. But the roles of arcanists far exceeded those of martial artists, making arcanists more respected.

He wondered when the martial artist system would produce a martial god.

"It's really frustrating," Xu Qi'an said.

...

When they returned to the station, Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong were no longer in the hall. They had left a Huben Guard behind, who informed Xu Qi'an and Li Miaozen that the Inspector General was waiting in his room.

Knocking on Inspector Zhang's door, Xu Qi'an and Li Miaozen entered the room.

"The person General Li drew is the black market shop owner who kept the evidence for Zhou Min. I deciphered the code Zhou Min left behind, explored the place, and found the ledger," Xu Qi'an explained to Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong.

After listening, Inspector Zhang's expression became serious. "Could the original owner be the one who truly kept the ledger?"

Xu Qi'an nodded, "Most likely. And if I'm not mistaken, he was probably silenced. The shop owner I met later was Liang Youping in disguise."

Jiang Lyuzhong stroked his stubbly chin, puzzled. "How did they find the black market?"

"Remember what I said when analysing the case," Xu Qi'an rubbed his brow, "We found shop Ding No. 15 in the black market through Yang Yingying's clue. But this clue wasn't meant for us; it was for Lord Yang, the Provincial Governor of Qingzhou."

"In other words, Zhou Min's original clue to us was decoded by someone else earlier."

There were many smart people in this world.

Li Miaozen shook her head, "Don't you find it odd? If they had found the ledger, why not just destroy it? Why wait for you to find it and then hand it over?"

Jiang Lyuzhong was shocked, "Was the ledger switched? Did we get a fake?"

"No!" Inspector Zhang shook his head, "If the ledger were fake, it would quickly be exposed when I compare it at the Military Command. What would be the point of sending a fake ledger?"

Jiang Lyuzhong frowned even more, "But sending the real ledger is even more absurd. Killing the original shop owner, then returning the ledger to us unchanged?"

"Indeed, the ledger, whether real or fake, defies logic." Xu Qi'an rubbed his brow and paced the room:

"Let's review the case thoroughly.

"Zhou Min discovered Yang Chuannan secretly supporting bandits and reported it in a secret letter to the authorities. The Qi Clique learned of this and immediately created a corruption case to pressure Duke Wei.

"Then, through my serendipitous discovery, we uncovered the Qi Clique's collusion with the Church of the Warlock God, secretly supporting the bandits. The court then realized the seriousness of the matter and sent me..."

Inspector Zhang coughed forcefully.

Xu Qi'an corrected himself, "Sent the Inspector General to Yunzhou to investigate."

"I asked around in the black market earlier. The original owner of shop Ding No. 15 was killed about ten days ago. At that time, we were still at the Qingzhou border. General Li, when did Yang Chuannan receive the secret letter from the capital?"

"The letter arrived about six days ago, from a friend of Lord Yang," Li Miaozen replied.

"Exactly. We travelled the fastest route. Even if the Qi Clique was faster, they couldn't have been more than ten days ahead," Xu Qi'an nodded. "Killing Zhou Min to silence him and killing the shop owner should have nothing to do with the Qi Clique in the capital. Our real enemy is in Yunzhou.

"There are only two possibilities for this case: One, it's a ruse by Yang Chuannan. Two, there's a mastermind preparing to use Yang Chuannan as a scapegoat. The scheme began as soon as the secret letter was sent back to the capital, killing Zhou Min, finding the hidden evidence, and attempting to frame Yang Chuannan.

"If the ledger is real, the first scenario is unlikely because it would be like handing us the knife.

"If the ledger is fake, it makes even less sense. Yang Chuannan neither clears his name nor is he truly convicted. Liang Youping giving us the ledger would instead arouse suspicion, inadvertently saving Yang Chuannan."

Li Miaozen keenly spotted a logical flaw, "So, the ledger must be real. According to your theory, the ledger is real; there's a mastermind trying to push Yang Chuannan out as a scapegoat.

"In that case, Liang Youping killing the shop owner and handing you the ledger is unreasonable."

Yes, if the ledger is real, the mastermind only needs to wait for the Inspector's team to find it, making Yang Chuannan defenseless.

Liang Youping's actions were superfluous.

Inspector Zhang pondered, "Perhaps there's an issue with the ledger. The ledger is real, but it has a problem that will point us to the real mastermind. So they had to find it and eliminate the flaw.

"Then, they impersonated the shop owner, waiting for us to find them and hand over the ledger."

Jiang Lyuzhong first nodded, then shook his head, "How would they know there's an issue with the ledger? Wasn't it created by Zhou Min?"

Inspector Zhang smiled, "Zhou Min found the evidence because he was a clerk at the Military Command, overseeing warehouses and supplies. Liang Youping was also a clerk."

Xu Qi'an suddenly said, "There's something I don't understand."

"Hmm?" Li Miaozhen looked over.

"Why was Liang Youping the one responsible for handing us the ledger?" Xu Qi'an glanced at the three of them, "Don't you find it odd? Liang Youping was already exposed. Once we capture Yang Chuannan and interrogate him, he'll reveal everything to prove his innocence.

"In that case, just comparing Liang Youping's portrait... well, we'd end up having this meeting."

Li Miaozhen frowned, "Because only Liang Youping could find the problem with the ledger?"

Jiang Lyuzhong glanced at her, "They had plenty of time to find the issue with the ledger. They could then switch disguises, no need to keep Liang Youping there. If Ningyan hadn't seen your portrait, he wouldn't have realized the shop owner was fake.

"In other words, if it weren't Liang Youping, we wouldn't have noticed. It seems they exposed the flaw on purpose."

As for disguises, with Xu Qi'an and others' keen eyesight, any close encounter would be sufficient to see through them.

...

Zhu Guangxiao woke up from a dream, feeling his bladder full, so he got up to use the toilet.

Leaving his room and walking down the corridor, he suddenly saw a woman in a white dress sitting at a table in the hall.

She had long, beautiful black hair. From this angle, Zhu Guangxiao could only see her profile, and just this profile was stunningly beautiful, not of this mortal world, making his heart skip a beat.

\*Su, Miss Susu... no, it's that female ghost!!\*

Zhu Guangxiao's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets.

## Chapter 217. Dream World

Seeing this woman, Zhu Guangxiao trembled with rage. In the dead of winter, he broke out in cold sweat, his hands and feet icy. How could this world be so treacherous, filled with oppression against men?

\*She toyed with my feelings, hurt my dignity, and now she brazenly appears before me again...\*  
Tears welled up uncontrollably.

Zhu Guangxiao suppressed the urge to punch, held in his urine, and turned to knock on Song Tingfeng's door.

Song Tingfeng, wrapped in a robe and seemingly just awake, opened the door, grumbling, "What is it? Why are you visiting so late at night?"

"Come over here, shh, keep your voice down..."

With a grim expression, Zhu Guangxiao pulled Song Tingfeng out quietly to the corridor, pointing downstairs to the hall. "Look!"

Seeing what was downstairs, Song Tingfeng also started trembling with rage, his hands and feet icy, and tears welled up uncontrollably...

The two martial artists' eyes turned red, their minds shattered. Song Tingfeng gritted his teeth, "She actually has the nerve to come to the post station, thinking we Nightwatchers are pushovers?"

Zhu Guangxiao said in a deep voice, "What do we do?"

This matter absolutely must not be leaked, or they would be nailed to the pillar of shame forever, unable to regain their honour. How would they live in the yamen after this?

"Let's just do it. Let's send her to the cold palace — let's go all the way," Song Tingfeng made a downward cutting gesture.

"No."

Zhu Guangxiao, though usually silent and reserved, was not stupid. He analysed, "Since she came here, it means that the roaming cavalry General is here too. We can't act rashly. If we do, we'll expose ourselves and be held accountable by the Inspector General."

"So what do we do?"

"I suggest we discuss it with Ningyan."

The two exchanged a glance, feeling that they could only turn to that scoundrel.

At that moment, Su Su downstairs sensed something, suddenly looked up and saw them, and a sweet smile blossomed on her face:

"Oh, it's you two."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao's faces froze.

...

"Guessing blindly is useless now. My suggestion is, tomorrow we go to the Military Command to check the accounts and confirm the ledger's authenticity. Then, issue a province-wide arrest warrant for Liang Youping."

Inspector Zhang gave his opinion.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the beautiful military woman with a melon-seed face, feeling heavy-hearted. Because even with Li Miaozen's connections and influence, she couldn't catch Liang Youping, which meant the other side had a powerful backing.

A province-wide arrest might not be reliable.

The key to this case lies with Liang Youping.

"Great idea!" Jiang Lyuzhong, however, didn't care much and strongly supported Inspector Zhang's suggestion. Stroking his chin, he said:

"If we can't catch Liang Youping, we'll just use Military Command Yang Chuannan to settle the score."

Now it was Li Miaozen's turn to tremble with rage.

So, if this was Yang Chuannan's ruse, it was basically suicidal. Whether it was Inspector Zhang or Jiang Lyuzhong, they were both old hands in officialdom.

People who mix in the court have ambitions, but to say they couldn't tolerate any injustice and were champions of justice was too naive.

Can someone full of righteousness thrive in the bureaucracy?

Absolutely not.

Inspector Zhang would try to find the real culprit and seek justice, but he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice Yang Chuannan to gain merit.

Yang Chuannan was most certainly not innocent; firstly, he could not escape the charge of negligence. Secondly, he was a member of the Qi Clique, and now that the Qi Clique has fallen, the rules of the officialdom dictate: purge!

"Gold Gong Jiang, this is too reckless." Xu Qi'an tried with all his might to open big eyes wide, resisting sleepiness, speaking righteously:

"Why was Zhou Min silenced, who is behind framing Yang Chuannan, is it a distortion of human nature or a loss of morality? As bearers of the imperial mandate, we should do our utmost to bring justice to the innocent and restore the integrity of Yunzhou's officialdom."

Jiang Lyuzhong and Inspector Zhang looked at him strangely. This guy was not someone who liked to spout grandiose rhetoric.

"Well said!" Li Miaozen applauded, her beautiful melon-seed face lifted, her eyes gleaming, and she looked at Xu Qi'an with approval and affirmation.

Hearing Li Miaozen's praise, the two seemed thoughtful, as if they had guessed something.

"Then, Ningyan, I will trouble you to continue investigating this case." Inspector Zhang said earnestly, "You must find out the truth."

\*Inspector Zhang's heart is definitely black... I was so foolish to play smart in front of him...\* Xu Qi'an felt like he had shot himself in the foot. He glanced sideways and saw Li Miaozen's beautiful eyes sparkling, looking at him with hope.

"I can only... do my best."

Xu Qi'an was no longer a young man full of hot blood, and he wouldn't make grand promises. Back when he was eighteen, his slogan was: I control my own fate, not the heavens.

By the time he was thirty-five, his slogan was: Please, heavens, stop messing with me.

At this moment, they heard a commotion outside the room, accompanied by a strong fluctuation of energy.

Jiang Lyuzhong was the first to push open the door. His eagle-like eyes scanned sharply, and then he saw Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao covering one eye with one hand, clenching their fists with the other, their energy surging, waving wildly.

They were shouting, "Stay away, we won't make the same mistake twice."

Opposite them, the peerlessly beautiful Su Su was frowning, looking innocent.

"Misunderstanding, all a misunderstanding..." Xu Qi'an rushed out, spread his arms, and wrapped them around his two colleagues' shoulders, half-pushing, half-carrying them into the room.

"What's wrong with you two?" he frowned.

"What's with that female ghost?"

The two were very agitated, saying in a deep voice, "You knew our situation... and still let her come to the station? If this gets out, how are we supposed to face people?"

"She's here with her master to discuss the Yang Chuannan case." Xu Qi'an said irritably, "If you don't expose it yourselves, who would spread it around? She's like a well-traveled carriage, what kind of men hasn't she seduced? You two are just being immature."

Song Tingfeng felt a bit better, but still grumbled, "I don't care. Seeing her makes me uncomfortable all over, so ashamed that I want to howl at the sky. I don't want to see her."

Zhu Guangxiao nodded in agreement.

Xu Qi'an's eyes were suddenly filled with pity; there was a condition called "Susu PTSD."

After calming them down, Song Tingfeng asked, "Did Yang Chuannan confess? Is that Cavalry General here to cause trouble?"

"This case is tricky..." Xu Qi'an lamented his lack of a cigarette, sighing, "Do you know the true identity of the boss we met at the dogmeat shop? He was a clerk in the Military Command."

He briefly explained the situation.

The room fell silent. Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao looked at each other in horror, a cold sweat breaking out on their backs.

They thought they were on the fifth level, but it turned out the others were on the fifth level.

"If only we had brought him back to the post station then." Zhu Guangxiao said sullenly.

"Why didn't you remind me?" Xu Qi'an massaged his temples. Lately he often felt dizzy, even having slight hallucinations.

"Who could have thought he was fake?" Zhu Guangxiao said in a dark voice, "At that time, the Inspector and Gold Gong Jiang were out inspecting. I thought we'd wait for them to return, report the progress, and if necessary, follow orders to arrest him. Besides, once we had the evidence, he was worthless."

"Yes, if he wasn't fake, we could have gone back to find him." Song Tingfeng said.

"Always thinking in hindsight." Xu Qi'an said irritably.

"By the way, the name you mentioned earlier sounds familiar..." Zhu Guangxiao frowned, pondering, "I had a strange dream, dreaming that someone locked me in a small dark room."

Xu Qi'an laughed, "Was that small dark room called 404?"

"What 404?" Zhu Guangxiao didn't understand, continuing, "Someone locked me in a small dark room, constantly asking: where is Liang something... I can't remember the name."

Song Tingfeng's eyes widened, "Liang Youping?"

Zhu Guangxiao was surprised, "Yes, that's the name. How did you know?"

Song Tingfeng said, "...I had the same dream."

Xu Qi'an's face changed dramatically, as if he had heard something terrifying.

Chapter 218. Bravo, Number Two!

Was the same dream just a coincidence?

Xu Qi'an thought about the Church of the Warlock God. The warlocks the ability to enter dreams, so invading the dreams of Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng was standard practice.

This was a very simple inference.

What Xu Qi'an couldn't understand was why the Church of the Warlock God would forcefully question the whereabouts of Liang Youping in the dream.

\*Isn't Liang Youping a member of the Qi Clique? Isn't the Qi Clique colluding with the Church of the Warlock God? Shouldn't they be on the same side?\*

"What's wrong with you?"

Song Tingfeng noticed that his colleague's expression was off and asked with concern.

"Old thousand-layer cake..." Xu Qi'an muttered.

"What do you mean, are you craving a cake?" Zhu Guangxiao waited for his response, ready to call the innkeeper to prepare a midnight snack if Xu Ningyan said yes.

Xu Qi'an didn't answer. Instead, he left the room and knocked on the door of a neighbouring Silver Gong's room.

"Silver Gong Zhao, did you sleep well last night?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The Silver Gong named Zhao looked at him unhappily and replied, "It was good until you disturbed me."

"Did you have a dream?"

"...How did you know?" Silver Gong Zhao was taken aback.

Xu Qi'an's expression immediately turned serious, and he asked urgently, "What did you dream about?"

"I dreamed about the girls from Jiaofangsi. Sigh, we've been in Yunzhou for so long without even touching a woman's hand. It's unbearable..."

"Sorry for the disturbance. Goodbye!"

He then knocked on the doors of the Bronze Gong and the Huben Guards, questioning a dozen people, but found that none of them had dreamed. Only Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng had been interrogated in their dreams at the entire station.

How pitiful, not only did they get PTSD from Susu, but they were also imprisoned and interrogated in their dreams.

All the bad luck seemed to fall on them... Xu Qi'an looked at his two colleagues with renewed pity.

"Your gaze is making me very uncomfortable. If you keep looking at me like that, we can't be brothers," Song Tingfeng said sternly.

"We're father and son, to begin with."

After Xu Qi'an said this and saw Song Tingfeng raising a stool to hit him, he quickly apologized, "I was wrong, I was wrong. You go aside, I need to think."

"What happened?" Zhu Guangxiao asked.

"Let me sort out my thoughts," Xu Qi'an waved his hand.

\*Only Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng were interrogated in their dreams, and they were asked about Liang Youping's whereabouts... It was obvious that the reason was because we had been to the black market and obtained the ledger from Liang Youping... As for why I wasn't interrogated, the reason is simple: I was burning the midnight oil cultivating!\*

\*No, no, my mind is getting more and more muddled. I can't bear this alone, I need to get Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong to share the burden...\* Xu Qi'an immediately went out to find Inspector Zhang.

As he passed by the room where Yang Chuannan was held, he coincidentally saw Li Miaozhen coming out with Jiang Lyuzhong and the beautiful female ghost Susu following behind them.

She had just "visited" Yang Chuannan.

"Is General Li leaving?" Xu Qi'an approached them.

Li Miaozhen nodded. Despite the case being perplexing, the inspector had promised to do his utmost to uncover the truth, leaving a glimmer of hope for Yang Chuannan.

She had come to the station this time to seek that glimmer of hope, to make the relationship with Yang Chuannan worth it.

Including allowing the Flying Swallow Army to enter the city, it was a form of pressure, a bargaining chip, not a real intent to fight to the death.

"Heh, I'm afraid you can't leave!" Xu Qi'an teased.

Li Miaozhen was stunned, squinting her eyes at him.

Susu scolded coquettishly, "Master, this guy wants to harm you. Let Susu teach him a lesson."

Saying that, she prepared to spray Xu Qi'an with "salty soda," but before she could, Li Miaozhen blocked her.

"You're just looking for an excuse to take revenge." Li Miaozhen glanced at her and then turned to Xu Qi'an, "What's the matter?"

"Don't be in a hurry to leave. The second half has just begun. I just got some new clues," Xu Qi'an said, pinching his forehead.

Jiang Lyuzhong raised an eyebrow in surprise, "What did you remember?"

The three of them entered Inspector Zhang's room together. Inspector Zhang, who was nearly fifty, was already a bit of a fossil. However, due to the presence of arcanists from Sitianjian, the life expectancy of the literati in this world was relatively high, allowing them to enjoy life up to the point they finally get some sort of cancer, just like in Xu Qi'an's previous life.

Inspector Zhang was about to sleep but had to reluctantly get up and dress again.

He then instructed his attendant to open the door.

"It's late at night, can't whatever it is wait until tomorrow?" Inspector Zhang pinched the bridge of his nose, "I'm just an ordinary person, not as energetic as you martial artists."

Li Miaozhen instinctively refuted, "I'm not a martial artist."

Xu Qi'an and Jiang Lyuzhong gave her a cold side glance.

Inspector Zhang waved his hand impatiently, "Say what you want, then get lost."

Scholars were very particular about health. Staying up late was simply a waste of life.

Li Miaozhen and Jiang Lyuzhong both looked at Xu Qi'an.

\*Here we go again,\* thought Inspector Zhang, helplessly looking at Xu Qi'an.

"There's something I think you all should know."

Under the gaze of the three, Xu Qi'an slowly began to speak, describing the interrogation of Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao in their dreams.

"Indeed, it's the method of the Church of the Warlock God," Jiang Lyuzhong confirmed.

Li Miaozhen nodded in agreement and then looked at Xu Qi'an, "The reason you weren't interrogated is that you were pushing to refine your spirit and didn't sleep?"

"Mhm."

"The Church of the Warlock God is also looking for Liang Youping?" Inspector Zhang struggled to process this information and was momentarily confused, "Isn't Liang Youping a member of the Qi Clique?"

The Qi Clique and the Church of the Warlock God were supposed to be in cahoots.

Li Miaozhen stared at the candlelight flickering like a tiny bean on the candlestick, lost in thought for a moment. "Could it be that we were wrong? Liang Youping isn't a member of the Qi Clique, and giving us the ledger wasn't a ploy to frame Lord Yang?"

Jiang Lyuzhong felt a headache coming on. If that were the case, the situation would become extremely complicated.

"The information that Liang Youping is a member of the Qi Clique came from you, not from our speculation," Xu Qi'an glanced at her and continued, "Moreover, if Liang Youping isn't a member of the Qi Clique, then a lot of things wouldn't make sense. I personally lean towards the idea that he is indeed a member of the Qi Clique. Our previous inference was correct."

"Then how do you explain the Church of the Warlock God looking for him?" Li Miaozen frowned.

\*... This girl's intelligence is about average... Although not foolish, she isn't particularly smart either... If only Huaqing were here, my burden would be much lighter... Even Number Four would do; Number Four is good at making connections...\*

The four of them discussed for a while but didn't gain any new insights. Inspector Zhang was feeling tired, and since he had to visit the Commandery tomorrow, he did not want to stay up late. Jiang Lyuzhong and Li Miaozen weren't adept at reasoning, and Xu Qi'an's mind was about to split.

They had no choice but to postpone the discussion for another day.

"Inspector, I'll stay here tonight," Li Miaozen requested.

Inspector Zhang agreed readily. The station was their headquarters, with Gold and Silver Gongs stationed, so he wasn't worried about Li Miaozen doing anything reckless.

Li Miaozen gave Xu Qi'an a deep look.

...

Returning to his room, Xu Qi'an found Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao still there, both sitting cross-legged in meditation.

"Why haven't you two left?"

"Waiting for your news."

"No news, get out, go back to your rooms to cultivate. Remember not to sleep tonight."

After driving away his two colleagues, Xu Qi'an carried a wooden basin downstairs and took a cold bath in the bathhouse, feeling instantly refreshed.

He reached for the towel, only to find it missing.

"Are you looking for this?" A coquettish voice came from behind, and a hand extended, revealing a white, delicate arm from a wide sleeve.

"Miss Susu, men and women should not touch hands in passing," Xu Qi'an didn't take the towel nor did he turn around, feeling somewhat annoyed.

It wasn't because he felt shy about a woman watching him bathe, but rather because one could see and touch this paper figure, but certainly couldn't lay it (the action of laying down). But the paper figure had no sense of propriety and always appeared at times like this.

"Men and women should not touch hands in passing?"

Susu, in a white dress, moved to the edge of the tub, looked down at the clear water in the dim moonlight, and said sharply, "This lady wouldn't even look at a bean sprout."

Xu Qi'an threw the towel into the water to serve as a screen, blocking the ghost's invasive gaze. He said calmly, "Miss Susu, have you ever heard a saying?"

Susu tilted her head to look at him.

"Nuts do not grow in cold climates."

"Nuts do not grow in cold climates?" Susu didn't understand what he meant by that.

\*... Playing word games in this world is a kind of loneliness in and of itself, cold places... Yeah, puns should be punishable by imprisonment...\* Xu Qi'an lost interest in teasing the ghost and said impatiently, "Do you have something to say? I've been soaking in cold water for a while now and might catch a cold."

"Can a Refining Qi martial artist catch a cold?" Susu chuckled and sat boldly on the edge of the tub, her eyes bright.

"Was what you said earlier true? Were you not lying to me?"

Xu Qi'an knew what she was referring to and immediately made a big promise, "Of course, a man's word is his bond. Are you eloping with me?"

"What do you mean by eloping? That sounds awful." Susu's voice was soft, and she gave him a sideways glance, bargaining, "I can help you with three things in exchange for a body. How about it?"

What can a weak ghost like you help me with? Just trying to freeload off me, woman!

Xu Qi'an refused outright, "No."

"Please, won't you reconsider?"

"Even if you use your charm on me, I won't fall for it."

"Heh, you'd better look at this before you say that."

"... Alright, but I don't want you to do three things; just one. Once you have a new body, be my concubine for a few years."

This was nonsense since Song Qing didn't have the technology to create a body. Talking about it was purely to trick her into returning to the capital with him.

"I'm still a virgin," Susu said shyly.

"Yes, and every time you switch to a new paper body, you're a virgin again," Xu Qi'an retorted.

"I'm talking about when I was still alive," she sighed, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, looking down at the stunning reflection of her face in the water.

"When I was alive, I was the precious daughter of a wealthy family. When I was eighteen, father arranged a marriage for me. My future husband was a scholar, handsome and polite. I was eagerly waiting to get married in my boudoir.

"But who would have thought that in the spring of the following year, my father got involved in a major case and was beheaded by the damned Emperor. The women of

our family were supposed to be sent to the Jiaofangsi, but my mother couldn't bear the humiliation and made a pot of chicken soup mixed with arsenic for us...

"I remember I had a younger brother who was away studying at the time and escaped the disaster. After I died, my soul lingered in the mass grave for several days. Just as I was about to dissipate, I encountered a master from the Heaven Sect who said I was an exceptionally rare spirit and took me in.

"I stayed in the Heaven Sect for more than twenty years, watching my master grow from a crying baby to a young adult..."

Xu Qi'an was initially listening with great interest, but suddenly a critical point dawned on him, and his voice became sharp, "What? You've been dead for more than twenty years!"

Susu puffed out her chest and said, "By age, I could be your mother."

"Mummy!"

"... You have no shame," Susu was a bit embarrassed. She had been a virgin when she died, and although she often seduced men at her unscrupulous master's behest after becoming a ghost, it was all just flirtation since a ghost has no physical body.

The mileage didn't count.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I have two wishes. One is to see my brother again, in a flesh-and-blood body, just like back then. The second is to uncover the truth behind my father's involvement in that case."

In the tub, the cold water rippled, reflecting the moonlight onto her face.

Xu Qi'an felt a long-lost stirring, a feeling every man has when he sees an extraordinary beauty—more accurately, a rush of hormones.

"What's the deal, was your father wronged? Then come with me, I'll help you investigate. Is there anyone better at solving cases than me?" Xu Qi'an thought this ghost woman was blind.

"I don't remember," Susu shook her head, "I can't recall anything from that time. I don't even remember why I died."

"Well, it has been over twenty years."

Susu shook her head again, "My master's master once invited a high-ranking warlock to divine my fate, but he couldn't divine anything. The warlock said it was related to the Sitianjian."

The amount of information in that sentence was staggering, leaving Xu Qi'an stunned for a long time.

\*Li Miaozhen's master knew people from the Church of the Warlock God? Hmm, not necessarily. Practitioners of the warlock system might not be members of the Church; they could be independent... The sixth rank in the warlock system excels at divination, hence sixth-rank warlocks were called Masters of Divination... How does a mere female ghost get entangled with the Sitianjian?\*

\*Wait, if Masters of Divination are good at divination, why couldn't they locate Liang Youping? Instead, they entered Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao's dreams?\*

"Hey!"

Susu puffed out her cheeks angrily, "I'm talking to you."

Xu Qi'an frowned, "I'm listening."

Susu pouted, "Anyway, that's how it is. If you can create a living body for me, I'll be your concubine. If I'm in a good mood, I'll even bear you a big, healthy son."

"Buy one, get one free, thanks," Xu Qi'an rolled his eyes.

...

Finally getting rid of Susu, Xu Qi'an felt a small pang of guilt for deceiving the ghost. After all, he had given her false hope.

However, he decided to make it up to her by investigating her case after returning to the capital, as much as he could.

"A man with a soft heart ends up losing out," Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged on the bed, intending to alleviate his fatigue through meditation and breathing exercises, pulling himself back from the brink of sudden death.

But just then, a sudden sense of anxiety almost caused him to die on the spot.

"Damn..." Xu Qi'an cursed, groping under his pillow for the small jade mirror.

**【TWO: Apologies for disturbing everyone so late, I've encountered some difficulties in Yunzhou and need your help.】**

\*... Number Two might not be a brilliant girl, but she knows how to use her resources well... In the Earth Book Group Chat, except for Number Five, the others are all quite smart. Even Master Hengyuan, who bears deep grievances, is actually a clever person... If it weren't for my identity — students of the Cloud Deer Academy could hardly know about the Yunzhou case — I would have asked for help from the Heaven and Earth Society through the fragments long ago...\* Xu Qi'an could only say: Bravo, Number Two!

Chapter 219. Well Pleased

Xu Qi'an hung his head, staring at the mirror, waiting for a moment. The first to reply was Number Five, the little Southern Barbarian girl.

**【FIVE: Yunzhou is quite far from here, I can't help you.】**

\*She thought Number Two was asking for help in the real world? Number Five must still be groggy from sleep, but this level of intelligence is really unacceptable...\* Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched.

Next was Number Six, Hengyuan: **【What's going on? Is Sir Xu alright in Yunzhou?】**

Li Miaozen first replied that everything was fine, but she didn't rush to reveal the case details, as if waiting for something.

\*Was she waiting for me, or for Number One or Four? Probably both... She won't discuss the case until the brains of the group speak up...\* Xu Qi'an understood Number Two's strategy and used his finger as a pen to write:

**【THREE: Tell us about the case in Yunzhou.】**

Li Miaozhen breathed a sigh of relief and gathered her spirits. If only Number Five and Number Six responded, she wouldn't have planned to say anything.

She then detailed the entire case in the Book of the Earth chat group.

There was a lot of information, so she sent it piece by piece, taking a quarter of an hour to explain everything.

The response was a long silence. Just as she began to feel uneasy and anxious, Number One, who usually liked to lurk, surprisingly took the initiative to write:

**【ONE: There are two possibilities: One, Liang Youping isn't actually part of the Qi Clique, and he handed over the ledger to Xu Qi'an with an ulterior motive. Two, Liang Youping has gone missing.】**

\*Liang Youping is missing...\* Li Miaozhen pondered Number One's words. The second possibility was something she hadn't considered.

To be safe, she asked: **【Is there a possibility that Yang Chuannan and Liang Youping are in cahoots and staged a self-harming ruse?】**

**【ONE: Unlikely. Given the rules of officialdom, Yang Chuannan has to take responsibility this time, the only difference is the severity. If you were Yang Chuannan, would you dig a pit for yourself to fall into?】**

**【Liang Youping killed the original contact and destroyed the problematic parts of the ledger... Personally, I agree with this hypothesis. Therefore, his identity as part of the Qi Clique is highly probable.】**

At this point, Number Four spoke up: **【So, Number One thinks the Church of the Warlock God interrogated those two Bronze Gongs in their dreams about Liang Youping's whereabouts because Liang Youping has gone missing.】**

Number One's analysis opened Xu Qi'an's mind.

\*Liang Youping went missing, so the Church of the Warlock God is desperate to find him? Because if he fell into the "enemy's" hands, he would reveal many unfavorable secrets...\*

\*The mastermind in Yunzhou believed that we captured Liang Youping, so they sent the Church of the Warlock God to interrogate us in our dreams... Since I have had contact with Liang Youping, I was the most likely person to capture him, but because I haven't slept, they had to interrogate Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao instead...\*

\*But why did they wait three days to interrogate?\*

Li Miaozhen held the small jade mirror, waiting for a while, but she didn't hear any opinion from Number Three. He only asked a question at the beginning and then fell silent, making Li Miaozhen anxious.

Number Three is extremely clever. His insights and views might not be the standard answers but can certainly provide enough inspiration.

【THREE: Number Three, are you asleep again? What do you think about this case?】

\*I'm watching...\* Xu Qi'an mentally retorted.

He knew the other members of the Heaven and Earth Society were waiting for his opinion, so he wrote: 【I also have a question: Sixth-rank warlocks have the ability to divine the future, so why couldn't they find Liang Youping's whereabouts?

Additionally, warlocks have the ability to kill with curses. If Liang Youping was their accomplice, the most prudent choice upon learning of his disappearance would be to kill him to prevent him from leaking secrets.】

【FOUR: I'll answer that. Warlock curse spells can only target individuals with lower cultivation levels. Given Liang Youping's status, someone must be protecting him. It's unclear who, as many people could do this.

【As for divination, high-ranking experts from various systems have ways to counter divination against themselves, but they can't provide protection for others, except for one system.】

At this point, Number Four paused for a few seconds before continuing: 【The Sitianjian arcanists.】

It was like a bolt of lightning striking everyone's minds.

\*The Sitianjian arcanists?\* Xu Qi'an was shocked.

【TWO: Number Four, are you saying that Liang Youping was kidnapped by Sitianjian arcanists?】

【FOUR: Haha, all these speculations hinge on the premise that Liang Youping is missing.】

【ONE: If Liang Youping was indeed taken by Sitianjian arcanists, why wouldn't Inspector Zhang know? Or, is he deliberately hiding it from Number Two?】

【TWO: It doesn't seem like they're hiding it. They probably really don't know.】

【FOUR: That makes it even more intriguing. But there's one thing you should be wary of. If we can figure this out, so can the Church of the Warlock God, given that

arcanists counter divination and curses. Hence, tonight's dream interrogation to test if Liang Youping fell into the Nightwatcher's hands.

【Such tests won't happen just once or twice. We can turn this to our advantage and trace the mastermind. Inform Inspector Zhang, he will know what to do.】

Number One then commented: 【Additionally, the fact that they came to test suggests they're prepared for Liang Youping falling into the Nightwatcher's hands. At least in their eyes, falling into the hands of the Sitianjian arcanists is the same as falling into the Nightwatcher's hands.

【In that case, they must be ready to go down together.】

These words made Xu Qi'an and Li Miaozen shiver.

\*If that's the case, then we must strike first to gain the upper hand and capture the leader...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

\*But for now, the priority is to identify the mastermind behind the scenes. Otherwise, the enemy is in the dark while we are in the light, and that's a losing battle.\*

At this moment, Number One asked: 【ONE: Although this case is troublesome, with Xu Qi'an's abilities, he shouldn't be completely helpless, right?】

\*Number One, if you can speak, say more; you could even write a book...\* Xu Qi'an felt flattered and quite pleased.

Li Miaozen replied: 【He is attempting to break through to the Refining Spirit stage, and his condition is very poor.】

【SIX: Is Sir Xu already trying to break through to the Refining Spirit stage? When he left the capital, he was just short of reaching the peak of the Refining Qi stage. I thought he would take until spring to reach Refining Spirit. Truly a surprising talent.】

Only Xu Qi'an knew the real reason. As he reached Refining Qi, he suddenly had a massive amount on his plate, leaving relatively little time for cultivation.

On the journey to Yunzhou however, apart from bragging with colleagues, most of the time was boring, so he could only cultivate. Hence, the rapid progress.

【ONE: No, such talent would shake the world.】

Initially, everyone wasn't too concerned. After all, a seventh-rank warrior at the Refining Spirit stage wasn't a big deal. The members of the Heaven and Earth Society were all talented, intelligent, and articulate. A Refining Spirit stage warrior wouldn't cause much of a stir.

But hearing Numbers One and Six speak so highly of him piqued everyone's interest, including Li Miaozen, who had met Xu Qi'an in the real world.

【FOUR: Judging by your tone, this Bronze Gong seems quite exceptional, a prodigy even?】

Monk Hengyuan thought for a moment and replied: 【Not exactly. When he left the capital, he saw me, and given his condition at that time, he should have broken through to the Refining Spirit stage by spring. I didn't expect it to happen so quickly. Number One knows him better.】

【ONE: I mentioned his background before, but I didn't tell you that when Xu Qi'an joined the Nightwatchers, he was only at the Refining Vitality stage. Up till now, it's been only two months.】

No need to say more, everyone knew the significance of this statement.

Crossing a rank in two months was top-tier talent, regardless of the system or faction.

Number Four couldn't help but think that Number Three, suspected to be Xu Qi'an's cousin, might have something to do with this brilliant cousin. Now, with such an outstandingly talented Xu Qi'an, the Xu family in the capital might soon become a rising star.

Daoist Jinlian giving the Earth Book fragment to that cousin might have been a plan to benefit both brothers.

Li Miaozen was shocked. What Number One had told her that day was all about Xu Qi'an's prowess in solving cases, but he hadn't mentioned his innate talent.

...How many sleepless nights must he have endured? Li Miaozen suddenly became very curious about this question.

【FIVE: It's alright, crossing one rank in two months.】

Number Five, who had been unable to get a word in, sent this evaluation.

【THREE: That's already quite impressive.】

Xu Qi'an used his alternate account to boast about himself.

【FIVE: Yes, I didn't say it wasn't. I also crossed a rank in two months. Now I'm preparing to cultivate the Life Gu, which is a sixth-rank. It took me just over four months to go from the eighth rank to the sixth rank.】

?

A big question mark appeared in everyone's mind.

\*Crossing two ranks in four months and one rank in two months, it makes sense...\* The members of the Heaven and Earth Society seemed to understand why Daoist Jinlian invited Number Five to join.

Li Miaozen excitedly rolled on the table, clenched her fist, and waved it vigorously. Indeed, seeking help from the members of the Heaven and Earth Society was the right choice.

With the deep-thinking Number One, the experienced Number Four, and the extremely intelligent Number Three, they quickly sorted out the details of the case.

They even provided her with a plan for the next steps.

...

The next day, Xu Qi'an, sporting dark circles under his eyes, arrived in the hall for breakfast. Before long, Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong also came down.

Li Miaozhen was the last to appear, dressed in soft armour, carrying a silver spear, and with a sword at her waist. Her high ponytail swayed stylishly. Behind her followed the stunningly beautiful demon.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao tacitly turned their backs, presenting the back of their heads to Susu.

Li Miaozhen went straight to the table of Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong, glanced at Xu Qi'an first, then raised her sharp chin proudly and said, "I've solved the case!"

Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong exchanged a look, with the former's eyes flickering slightly, "Let's talk in the room. Ningyan, you come too."

In the room, Li Miaozhen vividly recounted the "chat log," leaving Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong bewildered.

"General Li, your attention to detail is impressive. I am in awe," Inspector Zhang said, feeling invigorated and shedding much of his overnight fatigue.

Jiang Lyuzhong also began to see this beautiful, almond-faced female general in a new light.

Li Miaozhen smiled reservedly, then suddenly turned to Xu Qi'an, "You don't seem to be convinced by this general's reasoning?"

\*Nonsense, we are in the same group. Why put on airs in front of me... Acting when you don't need to...\* Xu Qi'an cooperatively displayed a look of shock and admiration, praising, "General Li's ability to solve cases and reason is far superior to mine. I am deeply impressed."

Li Miaozhen smiled faintly, "This general didn't expect to have some talent for solving cases."

She felt ecstatic to be able to outshine Xu Qi'an, a skilled expert, in his presence.

Xu Qi'an also felt quite pleased because when his identity was revealed in the future, he wouldn't be the only one to suffer social death.

For some reason, he suddenly felt that the future was bright... Xu Qi'an smiled.

...

After breakfast, Inspector Zhang was about to head to the Headquarters of the Military Command when a Huben Guard came in to report:

"Inspector, Commissioner Song is here with a group of officials to visit!"

Inspector Zhang immediately exchanged a silent glance with Jiang Lyuzhong and the other two.

Clearly, the Yunzhou officials had come regarding the arrest of Commissioner Yang Chuannan last night. But after their earlier conversation, they were more cautious.

Perhaps this was also a probe—a probe from the mastermind behind the scenes.

## Chapter 220. Trust Between People

"You arrived quite early," Inspector Zhang said with a smile, leaving with Jiang Lyuzhong.

Xu Qi'an did not follow. Instead, he called over the three white-robed arcanists, who preferred not to dine with martial artists and were thus eating breakfast in their rooms.

"Master Xu has arrived."

The three white-clad arcanists hurriedly stood up and respectfully invited Xu Qi'an to sit.

"I have something to ask you..." Xu Qi'an deliberated for a moment, then said, "Besides you three, who else from our Sitianjian came to Yunzhou?"

To foster a sense of camaraderie, he intentionally said "our Sitianjian."

The three white-clad arcanists exchanged glances: "No one else, just the three of us."

Xu Qi'an's face darkened: "Are you looking down on me?"

"...Master Xu, really, it's just the three of us," the arcanists explained.

\*I wonder if using qi-watching on arcanists would work... return the favour in kind...\* Xu Qi'an nodded: "Got it."

He was just thinking; the three juniors wouldn't deceive him. Moreover, arcanists must have ways to shield their own qi, being professionals after all.

"Right now, there are officials visiting Inspector Zhang. You three go upstairs and watch how their qi changes, then report back to me."

After giving instructions, Xu Qi'an led the three white-robed arcanists to hide at the corner of the stairs on the second floor.

....

In the hall, Inspector Zhang received the various officials of Baidi City. Anyone with a significant position had gathered here.

With such a commotion last night, anyone who wasn't blind or deaf would know about it, let alone these city officials who closely watched every move of the Inspector.

After some pleasantries, Commissioner Song, dressed in scarlet robes, got straight to the point: "This morning, the soldiers reported that last night, you went directly to the Headquarters of the Military Command and arrested Lord Yang?"

Commissioner Song, with slightly high cheekbones and a habit of squinting when smiling, widened his eyes and stared intently at Inspector Zhang.

The other officials did the same.

Inspector Zhang nodded, speaking in a deep voice: "The Qi Clique colluded with the Church of the Warlock God, smuggling military supplies. I arrested him and brought him back to the post station for interrogation."

"This..." The officials' expressions changed slightly.

Commissioner Song frowned, lowered his voice, and earnestly said, "Inspector, be cautious, be very cautious."

He leaned closer to Inspector Zhang and continued, "Lord Yang is the Commander-in-Chief. Do you have solid evidence? Without it, it will be hard to convince everyone."

Even with the Inspector's authority, taking action against a dignified second-rank Commander-in-Chief required concrete evidence. Without evidence, it would be a severe taboo.

Firstly, the Yunzhou bureaucracy would not agree. Secondly, the military units under the Military Command wouldn't agree.

The former might just talk, but the latter comprised a group of soldiers and ruffians.

Evidence was definitely needed; without an explanation, it would cause trouble. However, Inspector Zhang did not immediately produce evidence. He smiled and said:

"Gentlemen, you have served in Yunzhou for many years. What are your impressions of Commander Yang Chuannan?"

Upon hearing this, the officials' expressions varied as they shared their thoughts.

At the stairwell corner, Xu Qi'an whispered: "Watch, watch carefully."

A moment later, he asked, "Who's lying? That shifty-eyed one on the left, he seems unreliable. The second one in the back row, he doesn't look like a good person...."

After speaking, he found the three white-robed arcanists silently staring at him. Xu Qi'an, feeling annoyed, said, "Why are you looking at me? Speak up."

One of the white-clad arcanists mumbled, "None of them are telling the truth...."

Xu Qi'an opened his mouth but couldn't find words to say. This was too damned real; this is the officialdom!

The so-called "not a single truthful word" meant that what the officials said didn't match what they thought.

But this didn't mean they were "wolves." In the officialdom, falsehoods and pretences were rampant. Saying ten sentences, with one being false, would be considered falsehood by the Sitianjian's qi-watching technique.

Qi-watching also had its limitations; it couldn't precisely time events down to the second.

Next, Inspector Zhang spoke to the officials about the account books but did not reveal them publicly.

...The officials exchanged subtle glances. How long had the Inspector's team been in Yunzhou? Less than half a month. Three days were spent inspecting outside.

Yet, in such a short time, they found evidence of Yang Chuannan's crimes?

For a moment, the officials felt a chill. Who could say they had no issues after being a clean official for three years and collecting ten thousand taels of silver?

If Inspector Zhang targeted them, none of them would escape unscathed.

An official swallowed nervously and asked, "Inspector, your team is full of talent. Who contributed significantly to this achievement?"

As he spoke, he glanced at the Nightwatchers.

The other officials discreetly scrutinized the Nightwatchers, all speculating.

Commissioner Song's eyes flickered, and he said with a smile: "I recall, the Bronze Gong who is skilled in agriculture did not accompany the Inspector on the inspection that day."

This reminded the officials. Senior-level officials began purposefully searching for Xu Qi'an.

Some looked at Inspector Zhang.

"Indeed, it was him!" Inspector Zhang nodded.

Actually, with the officials' intelligence, even without the Inspector's confirmation, they could guess. Few Nightwatchers remained at the post station, and Xu Qi'an, a Bronze Gong with a unique sabre, was clearly special.

"Humph!"

Xu Qi'an appeared at the right moment, coughed, and silently stood behind Inspector Zhang.

Noticing his uniqueness before, they didn't expect a Commander-in-Chief to fall at the hands of a Bronze Gong...

Many officials now looked at him with a mix of wariness and respect.

...

On the second-floor hallway, Li Miaozhen rested her hands on the railing, overlooking the people below. Beside her, Susu pouted, "Always showing off."

From their vantage point, they could see Xu Qi'an and the white-clad arcanists hiding.

Earlier, the credit for solving the case was subtly pointed out by Commissioner Song, and after Inspector Zhang acknowledged it, that obnoxious man immediately tidied up and made a grand entrance.

Susu didn't know the appropriate modern slang for "showing off", else she would have used it perfectly.

"Men care about their reputation; it's human nature."

Li Miaozhen was gradually changing her view of Xu Qi'an, thinking that aside from his lecherousness, he was impeccable in every other way. He was upright, spoke well, was good at solving cases, and was highly capable.

"You seem to have quite a prejudice against him, yet you don't really dislike him," Li Miaozen glanced at the female ghost and frowned, "You used to be disdainful of men, but now you seem to be at odds with him."

Susu didn't admit it and hurriedly argued, "I'm just angry! But Master, you seem to like him quite a bit."

Li Miaozen admitted generously, "Xu Qi'an is indeed quite good."

Susu then said, "He promised me last night that he would help me rebuild my body, but he had one condition."

"What condition?"

"To be his concubine for a few years."

"...Xu Qi'an is indeed of vile character, incorrigible."

After the discussion ended, the officials accompanied Inspector Zhang to the Headquarters of the Military Command to audit the accounts and verify their authenticity.

Auditing accounts was not Xu Qi'an's expertise, so he didn't join in the excitement. Instead, he was assigned to the post station to guard Yang Chuannan with other Nightwatchers.

When everyone had left, Xu Qi'an stood in the hall, looking up at the two beauties on the second floor, and smiled:

"When are you two leaving? Are you planning to rescue Yang Chuannan while Gold Gong Jiang is away?"

Susu snorted coquettishly, "My master is the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, the one and only Lady Flying Swallow, and she keeps her word."

Xu Qi'an shrugged, "Trust between people is fragile, like paper, easily torn."

Susu retorted loudly.

"Come down, and I'll show you," Xu Qi'an beckoned.

Susu leapt lightly from the railing, landing gracefully in the hall in front of Xu Qi'an.

"See, I told you," Xu Qi'an poked her chest with a finger, like piercing through a piece of paper.

"You vile man, I'll kill you," Susu was furious.

"See, I was right."

Susu furiously expelled yin energy to attack Xu Qi'an, but with his martial alertness, he easily dodged every attack, causing holes to appear in Susu's body, including her chest, back, and abdomen.

This body was quickly ruined.

Li Miaozen had to take out another paper figure for Susu to possess. Ghosts, without a physical body, would suffer severe damage or even dissipate under the scorching sun.

The paper figure had Taoist symbols on it to nourish the ghost and seal the yin energy.

"Hey, General Li, you still carry paper figures with you? Where do you hide them?" Xu Qi'an pretended to be curious.

"I have my methods," Li Miaozhen said.

"What methods? The legendary mustard seed technique?" Xu Qi'an widened his eyes, like a bumpkin who had never seen the world.

\*What is a mustard seed technique...\* Li Miaozhen was initially confused but felt satisfied with Xu Qi'an's admiration, so she nodded and said:

"It's a similar spell."

"General Li is indeed the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect," Xu Qi'an admired.

Li Miaozhen acknowledged with a reserved "Hmm."

\*...Just keep pretending. Isn't it just a fragment of the Earth Book? The more you show off now, the harder you'll fall later.\* Xu Qi'an smiled genuinely.

At noon, Xu Qi'an invited the two beauties for lunch, estimating that Inspector Zhang would be back soon.

Instead of the Inspector, they saw a soldier who guarded the city rush into the post station on horseback, shouting, "I have urgent business with Inspector Zhang!"

The Huben Guards stopped him, scolding, "Do not trespass into the courier station."

The city guard soldier was anxious and shouted, "Inspector Zhang, I have an urgent matter!"

The commotion in the yard alerted the Nightwatchers inside the post station. A Silver Gong led two Bronze Gongs out and frowned, "Inspector Zhang is not here. Speak to me."

The city guard soldier swallowed his saliva and urgently said, "The military forces of Headquarters are assembling outside the south gate, threatening that if Inspector Zhang does not come out to meet them, they will enter the city."