

Nightwatcher 221

Chapter 221. This Official is Xu Qi'an

“These Yunzhou soldiers dare to rebel?”

The Silver Gong's eyebrows immediately rose as he shouted, “What’s the situation outside the city now?”

The soldier, having rushed here on horseback, had lips turned blue and cracked from the cold wind, his mouth dry and voice hoarse, “The south gate of the city is already closed...”

“Don’t rush, catch your breath first!”

Hearing the commotion, Xu Qi'an came downstairs and poured a cup of cold water for the soldier.

The soldier quickly took it, gulping it down in one go, and felt his throat much relieved. He gave Xu Qi'an a grateful look and then spoke quickly:

“The garrison has gathered three thousand troops outside the south gate. Their commander, Xu Huchen, is threatening that if the Inspector General doesn’t release the Military Commander and give them an explanation within half an hour, they will enter the city!”

A military intervention!

Xu Qi'an, well-read in history, immediately thought of this term. Military intervention is the use of force to persuade a ruler or superior to comply. In simple terms, it's using fists to force submission.

The difference between a military intervention and a coup lies in the intent, though the actions are the same. Xu Qi'an's most vivid memories of military interventions were the death of Yang Yuhuan at Mawei Slope and the Young Marshal brandishing a small pistol at Chiang Kai-shek.

Both interventions were successful, one changing the future of the Tang Dynasty, the other changing the future of Modern China.

However, military intervention was a last resort, used only when absolutely necessary.

“The audacity of these dogs!”

Several Silver Gongs who had come to investigate were instantly furious upon understanding the situation.

Such an incident was unheard of in the capital. The surprise and anger they felt upon hearing the news were beyond words.

“The Inspector General has gone to the Military Command and can’t possibly reach the south gate within half an hour,” a Silver Gong said, gripping his sword hilt tightly, “How many city defense troops are there at the south gate?”

“Less than a thousand,” the soldier replied.

They probably can't hold the gate...

“In that case, we’ll lead the Huben Guards to the south gate. If those soldiers dare to rebel, we’ll cut them down. I’m sure we can hold out until the Inspector General and reinforcements arrive,” one Silver Gong proposed.

Several battle-hardened Nightwatchers immediately showed their eagerness.

The Huben Guards were battle-tested veterans, and with the Nightwatchers who were at the Refining Qi stage, they could coordinate with the city defense troops to hold off the garrison’s attack.

“What about Yang Chuannan? He’s a key criminal of the court; we can’t abandon him,” Xu Qi'an reminded the hot-headed Nightwatchers.

“Take him with us,” a Bronze Gong suggested.

“Do you think the garrison won’t fight us to the death if we do that?” Xu Qi'an raised an eyebrow.

“They are besieging the city for that exact reason,” the Bronze Gong scoffed, “They think they can force the Inspector General and us to yield with force? We’ll show these Yunzhou brutes what Nightwatchers are made of.”

This was what infuriated the Nightwatchers the most.

They were always the ones supervising officials and punishing corrupt ones, but now someone dared to challenge them at their doorstep, even threatening the Inspector General to come out within half an hour or they would storm the city.

This was blatant disregard for the Nightwatchers, trampling their dignity.

The scholars could endure it, but the martial artists could not.

The arcanists could endure it, but the martial artists still could not.

To hell with it.

Seeing the situation getting out of hand, Xu Qi'an knocked on the table and said sternly, “Everyone calm down, force won’t solve this problem.”

The Silver Gong who first received the soldier was the most irritable. He glared at Xu Qi'an and swore, “I can’t stand it! With Jiang Gold Gong not here, the Silver Gongs are in charge. Brothers, let’s go, and bring Yang Chuannan.”

Li Miaozen stood aside, watching coldly.

Bang!

With a loud bang of fist on table, Xu Qi'an stood up.

The Nightwatchers who were about to leave the post station stopped in their tracks, stunned.

Xu Qi'an pointed at the Silver Gong’s nose and cursed, “I don’t care if you’re a Silver Gong. Don’t try to fucking pull rank on me. Can you suppress me? Go ask that guy named Zhu if he can suppress me!

"If you escalate the conflict, what do you expect the Inspector General to do? Kill all three thousand soldiers? What if you can't hold them off and the fighting spreads to the city, affecting ordinary citizens? Can you take responsibility?"

The Silver Gong stood with his neck stiff, beard bristling in anger, "Xu Qi'an, do you think you can take responsibility?"

"At least my shoulders are broader than yours!" Xu Qi'an shouted.

For a moment, no one could refute.

A Bronze Gong's outrageous claim had silenced the entire room of Nightwatchers. Susu, the female ghost, watched in amazement, finding it hard to understand.

"You all stay here and guard Yang Chuannan. He is a key criminal of the court and must not be lost. Leave the outer city defenses to me," Xu Qi'an stated his plan since no one continued to argue.

"You?"

Everyone looked skeptical.

Xu Qi'an pinched his brow, explaining clearly, "The garrison's troops are at the city gates, not to attack but to demand the Inspector General release Yang Chuannan. This means there is room for negotiation.

"If you rush there with Yang Chuannan, it will be seen as a provocation, escalating the conflict and leaving no room for retreat for either side.

"Of course, I alone can't persuade the garrison's soldiers, but General Li can."

Xu Qi'an pushed Li Miaozhen forward, smiling, "I believe General Li doesn't want this situation to worsen and leave Yang Chuannan with no way out."

Li Miaozhen seemed to have been waiting for this outcome. She let out a slow breath, stopped watching coldly, and nodded, "I will do my best to hold out until the Inspector General arrives."

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Li Miaozhen and Xu Qi'an each took a fast horse and hurried towards the south gate, with Susu the paper doll hugging Li Miaozhen's small waist and sitting behind her.

"You're quite capable for a little Bronze Gong!" Susu tilted her head, examining Xu Qi'an who was riding alongside.

"It's not that I'm capable, it's mainly because..." Xu Qi'an coughed, speaking in a tone of divulging a secret, "Actually, Zhang Inspector and I are half-brothers."

Susu immediately seized on the key point: "Oh, you're the Inspector's brother?"

"How else would I have such authority?"

"I see..." Susu realized, feeling like she had discovered a big secret.

Li Miaozen twitched her mouth, wanting to remind her maid that not a single word Xu Qi'an said could be trusted. His authority came from the trust and appreciation of Wei Yuan, giving him an unusual status in the office. But how could information from the Heaven and Earth Society have anything to do with Li Miaozen?

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When they arrived at the south gate, they showed their tokens and climbed onto the city wall, where the garrison's Centurion personally received them.

"Why hasn't the Inspector General arrived yet?"

The Centurion, a burly man with a square face and triangular eyes holding a military-issue sabre, looked towards the empty street, unable to hide his disappointment.

"The Inspector General is investigating a case at the Military Command Headquarters and can't come for now. The General and I came first to buy some time," Xu Qi'an explained.

Standing on the city wall, he looked down. Outside the city, there were two formations. The larger one was the garrison's army, with cavalry in front, infantry behind, and artillery in the middle.

With flags fluttering, three thousand soldiers stood silently, exuding an indescribable ferocity.

Xu Qi'an was now one step over the threshold of Refining Spirit, but facing this battle-hardened army, he still felt a strong urge to avoid confrontation.

What kind of martial artist could achieve such a feat?

He sighed internally.

"Yunzhou's army is incredibly fierce, ready to cause trouble without fear of death," Li Miaozen said, holding a silver spear and standing beside him.

"I rushed to the station last night because I feared the Inspector General might act too aggressively, pushing things to an irreversible point."

Xu Qi'an nodded. Yunzhou's bandit troubles were rampant, so it was no surprise the soldiers were fierce. Soldiers who had fought for years were often hard to control, only respecting their commanders who fought alongside them.

Unlike soldiers from peaceful areas who cherished their lives more.

"That smaller formation over there, which garrison does it belong to?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The troops besieging the city belonged to the Baidi City's City Garrison Command, also just known as the Garrison. The smaller formation beside them, looking like four or five hundred men, Xu Qi'an guessed was from a county-level "garrison."

Li Miaozen looked a bit embarrassed: "That's my Flying Swallow Army."

Another traitor? Xu Qi'an looked at her with distrust.

Li Miaozen explained, "I did think about using my army to put pressure on them. It's a bad habit I picked up from the Yunzhou army."

She blamed it on the Yunzhou army.

"So what do we do now, go out of the city?" Xu Qi'an tested.

"Yes," Li Miaozen nodded.

"Can I not go?"

"You represent the Inspector General," Li Miaozen glared at him. "The Garrison Commander Xu Huchen is hot-tempered and obstinate. If you want to resolve the conflict, you must be patient."

"Your presence alone isn't enough?"

Li Miaozen snorted, "If I weren't here, he might just cut down a Bronze Gong like you."

"Hey, soldiers really are unreasonable."

The city gate creaked open, and the Centurion of the City Defense Army saw them off, waving his hand, "Take care."

Xu Qi'an, on horseback, looked back, "Centurion Sir, why not come with us?"

The Centurion replied, "The wind is too strong here, sir, I can't hear you... Oh, did you say close the gate? Alright, I won't open it even if I die."

The gate slowly closed.

"...", Xu Qi'an thought: *motherfucker*.

Li Miaozen didn't head directly to the Garrison but instead turned towards her Flying Swallow Army, summoning several dozen riders to lead the way as they approached the Garrison's three thousand troops.

"In my Flying Swallow Army, the lowest level of cultivation is the Refining Vitality stage, totalling four hundred and thirty-seven men. The squad leaders are at the peak of Refining Vitality, the platoon leaders at the Refining Qi stage, and the company commanders are at the Copper-Skin and Iron-Bone stage."

Li Miaozen's voice was clear and pleasant, with a hint of pride as she introduced her private army to Xu Qi'an.

Four sixth rank, forty Refining Qi... my god, this woman is terrifying!

Xu Qi'an gulped, "Such an army doesn't exist anywhere else in Yunzhou, right?"

Li Miaozen gave a reserved nod, "They all followed me to Yunzhou because of my influence."

How influential are you? Xu Qi'an turned to look at the beautiful warrior with a high ponytail on horseback, reevaluating her strength.

His initial impression of Li Miaozen was as the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect, followed by her identity as Lady Flying Swallow. But now it seemed that Lady Flying Swallow should come first.

Li Miaozen's connections in the martial world were probably deeper than he had imagined.

Everyone in the Heaven and Earth Society is so talented. I, a little Bronze Gong, need to step up my game... Hmm, I should set a small goal first, like becoming Wei Yuan's son...

"What is Xu Huchen's cultivation level?" Xu Qi'an suddenly asked.

"At the peak of the Refining Spirit stage," Li Miaozen replied.

"Lower than I thought," Xu Qi'an said with some surprise.

"And Wei Yuan is an ordinary person, yet he became the field marshal of the three armies," Li Miaozen shook her head and said, "Leading an army isn't about being brave and reckless. High-ranking martial artists can fight hundreds, even thousands, but that doesn't mean they can command a thousand-strong army.

"My ability caps at commanding five hundred men, but Xu Huchen can lead three to five thousand. On the battlefield, I would undoubtedly lose in a direct confrontation."

Violence is an aesthetic, but war is an art—two entirely different concepts.

Li Miaozen stopped five *zhang* away from the garrison army and called out loudly, "Commander Xu, come here and talk."

A single rider emerged, the leading general standing eight feet tall. His steed was larger than ordinary horses, and he wielded a long spear.

Anyone who used a long spear was a formidable and valiant general.

Xu Huchen, holding his long spear with a piercing gaze and a freshly shaven dark blue chin, nodded slightly towards Li Miaozen:

"General Li, are you also here to rescue the Commander?"

Li Miaozen shook her head: "Lord Yang is fine. Commander Xu, you are too impulsive. Do you know the consequences of your actions?"

"At worst, I'll die."

Xu Huchen replied bluntly, grinning, "My life was saved by the Commander. If the court wants to punish him, I'm willing to risk my life."

Xu Qi'an suddenly asked, "How did you get this information?"

Xu Huchen gave Xu Qi'an a sidelong glance and sneered, "So you're a lackey of Wei Yuan."

It's one thing to insult me, but insulting my patron is too much... Xu Qi'an flicked his thumb, revealing half an inch of his black gold long knife, and said in a deep voice:

"Commander Xu, do not challenge the authority of the court. I come with sincere intentions. If you fail to recognize this, you would have already been cut down from your horse."

Li Miaozen's lengthy explanation conveyed one main point: Don't try reasoning with soldiers.

Reasoning is for scholars. Soldiers respect strength; you only have dignity if your fists are strong.

Xu Qi'an's idea was to first display his strength, gain respect, and intimidate these fearless men. Only then could they talk things out properly.

Commander Xu was polite to Li Miaozen but coldly sarcastic to him, showing a lack of respect.

But cutting someone down directly wouldn't work—it would only escalate the conflict.

He turned his horse around silently and rode to the other side.

Xu Huchen and Li Miaozen, along with several dozen riders from the Flying Swallow Army, watched him closely.

"Hmph! I want to see the Inspector. Does a Bronze Gong deserve to talk to me?" Xu Huchen sneered disdainfully, "A young lad who thinks this is the capital where everyone fears the Nightwatchers?"

"General Li, how is the Commander?"

Li Miaozen shook her head, merely watching Xu Qi'an's back.

Xu Huchen grew impatient, his naturally volatile temper flaring. He was already extremely dissatisfied with the Inspector avoiding him and sending a mere Bronze Gong to deal with him.

He even had the urge to kill the Bronze Gong to make a statement to the Inspector.

Out of respect for General Li Miaozen, he was willing to come and talk.

At this moment, the Bronze Gong stopped and looked back at Xu Huchen with a cold smile.

Then, he flicked his thumb, making the blade protrude half an inch, gripped the hilt with his right hand, gathered strength for a brief moment...

"Clang!"

The sharp sound of the blade unsheathing echoed in the air. To Xu Huchen and his men, it seemed as if the air twisted slightly, as if something had sliced through it.

The next moment, with a dull thud, a fine crack appeared on the ground, stretching from Xu Qi'an's feet to the front of the army, extending over sixty feet.

Agitation arose in the front ranks of the cavalry, their horses seemingly frightened.

Xu Huchen's eyes widened in disbelief. *He... really could have cut me down from my horse just now.*

This battle-hardened general felt a tinge of awe and began to acknowledge Xu Qi'an's sincerity.

Li Miaozen stared at Xu Qi'an in surprise, a huge question mark flashing in her mind.

With her Heaven Sect Holy Maiden's insight, she judged that this blade strike was so sharp and swift that even a newly advanced sixth-rank Copper Skin and Iron Bone martial artist couldn't withstand it with their body alone.

Could a Refining Qi stage martial artist deliver such a strike?

She immediately recalled what Number One had said: Xu Qi'an once killed a Silver Gong, and that Silver Gong was at Refining Spirit.

Back then he could kill someone of higher rank, and now he's halfway to refining spirit.

If he were a genius, why didn't Daoist Jinlian invite him into the society but chose his cousin instead? That cousin must be... terrifyingly strong.

"Whoa."

Behind her, the experts of the Flying Swallow Army gasped in astonishment.

The little Bronze Gong rode back, suppressing his fatigue, and said lightly, "Commander Xu, this official is Xu Qi'an, here on behalf of the Inspector to discuss matters with you."

"..." Xu Huchen replied in a solemn voice, "Please, go ahead."

Chapter 222. Platitudes and Hostilities

Fuck me, I feel like I'm about to drop dead... Xu Qi'an's current state was akin to staying up for 72 hours and then being forced to run a thousand metres.

His heart pounded violently, teetering on the edge of overloading.

Fortunately, his solid foundation in the Refining Vitality stage granted his body great resilience and endurance. If it were his past self, he would've been lining up at the funeral home—or rather, he would've gone smiling to the afterlife around the fourth or fifth day of overexerting himself.

At least I've earned their respect and can now communicate properly... The most annoying thing is non-violent non-cooperation. Wouldn't it be better if everyone was a bit more gentle, sat down for some tea, and chatted? Xu Qi'an thought to himself, outwardly maintaining a calm demeanor as he spoke loudly:

"General Xu, do you know what case Commander Yang Chuannan has gotten involved in?"

Xu Huchen nodded, his voice deep, "This matter has already spread throughout the Yunzhou officialdom, but the Commander is innocent."

"Innocent or not, it's not up to you to say. It's not even up to the Inspector General to say—we need to investigate to find out." Xu Qi'an patiently explained,

"The Inspector has come specifically for this case. We do have some very incriminating evidence against Lord Yang, but the Inspector has not acted rashly. He has gone to the Military Command to verify the evidence.

"By bring three thousand troops to the city gates without any regard, lord Xu, is pushing Lord Yang into a dead end."

Xu Huchen snorted, "Don't try to pin a label on me. Last night, we received a secret report that the Inspector led a team to forcibly attack the Commander's residence. Lord Yang was gravely injured by a Gold Gong, leaving him on the brink of death.

"Even if Lord Yang is guilty, he should face a trial by the three judicial offices. You break into his residence instead of following legal procedures—aren't you just trying to force a confession?"

You don't understand—this is called rapid deployment, not giving the opponent time to react... If Yang Chuannan is indeed the mastermind, he would have already rebelled by now.

"The Inspector has his own methods. I know you're not afraid to die, but I must remind you, General Xu, if you wish to intervene, you certainly may, but do not act impulsively. Three thousand troops cannot overthrow Baidi City, let alone Yunzhou."

After Xu Qi'an finished speaking, he saw Xu Huchen glaring at him, seemingly enraged by his words. He calmly added,

"But think about Lord Yang—he's still safe at the courier station, with no conclusive evidence against him. Are you going to prematurely judge him, General Xu?"

Xu Huchen frowned, indeed showing some hesitation, unlike his earlier impulsive and violent stance.

"See, the case hasn't even been clarified yet, and you're already like this, General Xu. When the Inspector reports to the court, saying Yang Chuannan is holding troops and threatening with force... At that time, it won't just be the Inspector coming."

After the threat, Xu Qi'an then reassured him, "General Li is a close friend of the Commander. If you don't trust my words, you surely trust hers."

Seeing both sides turning their gazes toward her, Li Miaozen pondered for a moment before saying, "The current situation indeed puts the Commander at a disadvantage, but using military force is not the right way. General Xu, don't act impulsively. Give the Inspector some time."

Yang Chuannan was her comrade, and naturally, Li Miaozen's heart was with him. However, resolving problems required proper methods. If military interventions could work, Li Miaozen would have tried it long ago.

But the problem was that it wouldn't work. The Military Command could only mobilize the "City Garrison Command" under Baidi City. Although the garrisons in the rest of Yunzhou were nominally under the Military Command commission, the latter did not have the authority to give orders to the former. During wartime, the court would appoint generals temporarily.

Due to these limitations, Li Miaozen's Flying Swallow Army came into being.

With only three to five thousand troops from the "City Garrison Command," they couldn't shake the Inspector's authority and would only sacrifice themselves in vain.

"Hmph! I can wait, but if Inspector Zhang cannot give me a satisfactory answer, even if I agree, the thousands of brothers under me won't." Xu Huchen relented somewhat.

Phew... settled! Xu Qi'an sighed in relief.

When dealing with such conflicts, one must not act impulsively but learn to smooth things over. Handling it like the other Nightwatchers would have made this situation troublesome.

Detective Freeloader Xu instinctively resisted war, as it would result in many deaths. This issue did not necessarily need to be resolved through war.

As for how to handle the aftermath, that would be the Inspector's problem.

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Meanwhile, at the Military Command headquarters.

Having just finished reviewing the accounts, Inspector Zhang was still in a state of anger, slamming the table and scolding the officials, "Useless, all of you are useless.

"Yang Chuannan deserves to die. Even if he's not the mastermind, his dereliction of duty is enough to exile him.

"And you, too—the Military Command supplying military supplies to mountain bandits in such alarming amounts, and the entire Yunzhou officialdom is oblivious? You all deserve to die."

After checking the accounts, they were shocked to find that nearly a quarter of the military supplies sent to Yunzhou by the Ministry of Industry each year had disappeared, including bows and crossbows, gunpowder, firearms, iron ore, and more.

The officials bowed their heads, silently enduring Inspector Zhang's spittle, not daring to talk back.

After venting, Inspector Zhang took a sip of tea, ready to continue his tirade when hurried footsteps approached from outside.

A Bronze Gong barged in without announcing, shouting,

"Inspector General Sir, the city garrison of Baidi City—General Xu Huchen has gathered three thousand troops outside the southern city gate, threatening to enter the city if you don't release the Commander."

Entering the city was a euphemism; it meant attacking the city.

Inspector Zhang stood up in shock, and the dozen or so officials present stirred in panic.

"When did this happen? What's the current situation?" Inspector Zhang asked urgently.

"That Xu Huchen said, he demanded that Sir go and see him within the hour, but the hour has passed..." the Bronze Gong finished, and seeing the officials' faces all turn, hurriedly added:

"Xu Qi'an and the roaming cavalry general Li Miaozen went to negotiate, the current the current situation is unclear."

Hairs stood up on Inspector Zhang's head. He didn't realise that Yunzhou soldiers would be so hot-headed, and not listen to reason.

At this moment, he was both angry, but also anxious to the extreme.

Although Xu Qi'an excelled at case solving, Inspector Zhang knew that he was still wet behind the ears, having barely killed anyone, let alone trying to negotiate with an unreasonable army.

"Who allowed him to go? Who allowed him to go?" Inspector Zhang slammed the table in anger.

The Bronze Gong pouted, "Xu Qi'an insisted on stepping forward. The Silver Gongs' plan was to hold the city and wait for reinforcements.

"Xu Qi'an said he would take responsibility."

In all fairness, Xu Qi'an's approach was more stable and correct. The court typically handled mutinies by placating the troops first and then executing the leaders to set an example.

Avoid using force whenever possible.

However, Inspector Zhang knew that this situation was beyond Xu Qi'an's scope of expertise.

"Master Song, immediately notify the Five Cities Troops, gather forces to the south gate. All government offices deploy personnel to maintain order in the city...."

Inspector Zhang quickly made arrangements, demonstrating the qualities expected of an Inspector General despite the chaos.

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"Hyah, hyah..."

Inspector Zhang spurred his horse forward, nearly rattling his old bones apart. He didn't even dare to open his mouth to complain to Jiang Lyuzhong, fearing the cold wind would gush in, so he could only shout "Hyah" a few times.

Originally, in Inspector Zhang's plan, Jiang Lyuzhong was supposed to head to the south gate first, as a Fourth Rank Gold Gong was best suited to hold the line.

But Jiang Lyuzhong, as steady as a dog, refused to leave the Inspector's side, fearing that potential assassins might claim the Inspector's life, thus bringing honour to themselves by drawing first blood.

Jiang Lyuzhong was also worried, but not about the Guard Commander's troops attacking the city; rather, he was concerned about the life of Xu Ningyan, that scoundrel.

As a Gold Gong who had been to the battlefield, he knew well how troublesome and unreasonable the military could be. No matter Xu Qi'an's impressive presence in the capital or the fact that he had killed at the Ministry of Law's gates.

It was precisely because he was in the capital that the court officials were wary of him.

But this was Yunzhou, a place plagued by bandits. Anyone who risked their necks, whether bandit or soldier, was not a pushover.

The likelihood of drawing swords over a disagreement was very high.

As they approached the south gate, Jiang Lyuzhong's ears twitched slightly. He listened intently for a moment and then, relieved, said, "Inspector, there's no need to rush. Slow down."

Inspector Zhang didn't want to speak, treating Jiang Lyuzhong's words as wind in his ears, not responding.

"The battle hasn't started," Jiang Lyuzhong said.

Huh?

Inspector Zhang was taken aback. He indeed slowed down, reining in his horse to a trot.

"Really?"

"Yes."

Jiang Lyuzhong, being a high-ranking martial artist, would sense if there was a fierce battle outside the city.

"It seems the situation is relatively stable," Inspector Zhang breathed a sigh of relief, then looked at Xu Ningyan with newfound respect, "Did Xu Ningyan stabilize the situation?"

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head, "We'll find out when we get to the south gate."

Half an incense stick later, they saw the outline of the city wall. Inspector Zhang squinted and saw that the city defense troops on the wall were on high alert, with soldiers ready at the ballistae and cannons.

Inspector Zhang urged his horse forward, reining it in at the foot of the city wall. He lifted the hem of his official robe and hurriedly climbed the stairs.

His crimson official robe symbolized his status, and no one dared to stop him.

"Inspector, you're finally here."

A square-faced, triangular-eyed Centurion felt a great weight lifted off his chest upon seeing Inspector Zhang, letting out a long sigh of relief.

Inspector Zhang, who had been anxious on the way here, collected himself upon reaching the city wall. He adopted a stern expression, hiding all emotions behind a mask of authority.

He stood on the city wall for a while before instructing, "Lower me down in a basket."

The Centurion said, "We can open the city gate directly. Just now, that Bronze Gong and the Lady Flying Swallow went out through the gate."

Nonsense... Inspector Zhang's mouth twitched, "If the Guard Commander's troops really intended to attack, the city gate would already be lost."

The Centurion immediately bowed his head.

"No need for the basket. I'll take the Inspector down," Jiang Lyuzhong said, placing a hand on Inspector Zhang's shoulder. The next moment, Inspector Zhang felt a blur in front of his eyes and found himself outside the city, just ten meters from Xu Qi'an and the others.

Noticing Jiang Lyuzhong and Inspector Zhang's arrival, the group had mixed reactions. Li Miaozen remained unchanged, while Xu Qi'an's tense expression relaxed slightly.

Xu Huchen instantly tensed, his grip on his long spear tightening.

The Inspector was not terrifying; it was the Gold Gong by his side that was.

Inspector Zhang shouted, "Xu Huchen, dismount and speak."

Xu Huchen frowned, gripping his long spear tighter. After a moment's consideration, he hung his spear on the saddle hook and walked towards Inspector Zhang with empty hands.

"Inspector!" Xu Huchen cupped his fists.

"You've got some nerve," Inspector Zhang sneered, "Even if I ordered Gold Gong Jiang to kill you on the spot, I could still subdue the three thousand soldiers behind you."

Xu Huchen remained silent.

"All this fuss, isn't it just to save Yang Chuannan? Let me ask you, if Yang Chuannan is guilty of a capital crime, will you still save him?"

"Master Yang is innocent."

"I'm asking you, save or not?"

"Save!"

Inspector Zhang laughed heartily, "You're a man of courage. I admire that. Yang Chuannan's case is still under investigation. If you trust in Master Yang's character, I promise you, if he's innocent, I will clear his name."

After a pause, Inspector Zhang suddenly changed his tone, his words sharp and severe, "But leading troops without orders, besieging the city, is a capital offense!"

Reluctantly, Xu Huchen cupped his fists, "I... acknowledge my guilt. As long as the Inspector clears Master Yang's name, I am at your disposal."

"Very well, considering you haven't acted rashly, return your troops to camp, and I will overlook this incident," Inspector Zhang said magnanimously.

"Since the Inspector has given his word, I trust you," Xu Huchen got the answer he wanted, turned, and nodded slightly at Xu Qi'an.

Thanks to this Bronze Gong's mediation, the situation didn't escalate to an irreversible point.

Xu Huchen came to make a scene because he wanted a result or a promise, fearing that the Inspector from the capital would falsely accuse the Commander for his own merit.

Now, the Inspector had promised, and the case was still under investigation. The Commander had not been convicted.

This result was already very good.

Next, Inspector Zhang began to comfort the soldiers, displaying a respectful and humble attitude, which made Xu Huchen feel both flattered and grateful.

Rough men are like this—they don't flinch on the battlefield, but when someone shows concern, they become grateful and lose their fierceness.

Especially when someone as high-ranking as the Inspector shows such concern.

In the end, everyone was satisfied. Xu Huchen had an answer for his soldiers, and Inspector Zhang resolved the military intervention without causing a commotion.

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On the way back to the station, Inspector Zhang lavishly praised Xu Qi'an, "You truly understand human nature and know how to resolve conflicts. Ningyan, you've made another contribution."

Xu Qi'an waved his hand, too exhausted to engage in conversation.

Li Miaozen did not follow them back to the station, instead leading her personal soldiers back to the military camp.

Jiang Lyuzhong frowned and said, "Inspector, your stalling tactic will only work for a while."

Inspector Zhang sneered, "I know. Gold Gong Jiang. Tonight, go to the Guard Commander's camp and invite Xu Huchen and the other leaders to the city, saying I have a secret matter to discuss regarding the case of the Commander."

Xu Qi'an's heart sank.

Inspector Zhang continued calmly, "Once they're out of the camp, kill them all, leave no one alive."

"Inspector Sir..."

Looking at the Inspector's sudden turn of face, Xu Qi'an felt as if he had swallowed a dead rat, finding it hard to describe his feelings.

Inspector Zhang seemed not to hear and went on, "Without their leaders, the regular soldiers will be a disorganized rabble, easily pacified. Yang Chuannan's key supporters are the three to five thousand soldiers of the Guard Command. Eliminating this threat will make dealing with Yang Chuannan worry-free."

"But this case clearly has other hidden aspects," Xu Qi'an said in a serious tone.

"That's another matter. If the truth comes out, I'll clear Yang Chuannan's name. But Xu Huchen's rebellious intent is firm, and I must nip it in the bud," Inspector Zhang said softly, "I will summon troops from the various guard units in Yunzhou. This won't happen again."

The Inspector had the authority to mobilize troops from the garrisons.

After giving his instructions, Inspector Zhang glanced at Xu Qi'an and sneered, "Ningyan, kindness doesn't command troops. Whether in court or on the battlefield, hesitation leads to defeat. Soft-heartedness harms both oneself and others."

I understand the reasoning... Xu Qi'an sighed silently.

Having weathered many storms, Jiang Lyuzhong remained unfazed and asked, "Mobilizing troops from various garrisons—Inspector, are you planning to use this incident to suppress Yunzhou's officialdom?"

Inspector Zhang nodded slowly, "If Yang Chuannan isn't the mastermind, then the real culprit is in the city. Any official of fourth rank or above is suspect. I'm making preparations to prevent them from acting desperately."

Upon returning to the station, they barely had time for a cup of tea before the Huben Guard on duty came in to report, "Inspector, Governor Song and several other officials request an audience."

Inspector Zhang dismissed the bystanders and received the officials in the hall. They had come regarding Yang Chuannan's case.

"Since the evidence is conclusive, we hope you will make a decision soon," Governor Song said.

The Yunzhou Prefect and other officials echoed his sentiments.

Here comes the "pressure to decide"... Xu Qi'an thought.

If the mastermind is among these officials, their haste to pressure the Inspector into a decision makes sense, especially after he has reviewed the evidence.

But they're too hasty...

The garrison troops had just withdrawn, and they were already eager to pressure the Inspector into concluding the case. This didn't seem like the move of a seasoned schemer.

It could only mean that Liang Youping had found no leads, making them anxious to push Yang Chuannan out as a scapegoat.

The more anxious they are, the more likely they are to reveal themselves... Once Jiang slaughters Xu Huchen and the other leaders, and troops from the guard units are mobilized, the Inspector will be secure and can take his time dealing with the mastermind. So, stalling for now is sufficient...

Xu Qi'an's thoughts raced.

Sure enough, Inspector Zhang agreed to the officials' demands but claimed he needed to interrogate Yang Chuannan in private today and would hold a formal trial tomorrow.

He just needed to get through today.

After dismissing the officials, Inspector Zhang sipped his tea and sighed, "Our time is running short."

Killing Xu Huchen would stabilize the Yang Chuannan line, while mobilizing troops would secure the line against the real mastermind. Once the truth was revealed, the mastermind would undoubtedly resort to desperate measures.

Xu Qi'an pondered, "After Gold Gong Jiang completes his task tonight, we can have someone disguise themselves as Liang Youping to lure the snake out of its nest."

Just as he finished speaking, the Huben Guard on duty entered again and said, "Inspector, there's a group of armed guards outside claiming to be from the Fushun Escort Agency, requesting an audience."

"Fushun Escort Agency?" Inspector Zhang frowned, having no impression of this agency.

Chapter 223. Wanted by Court

"Fushun Escort Agency?"

Zhu Guangxiao, who was standing not far away, asked for confirmation, attracting everyone's attention, including Inspector Zhang's.

Inspector Zhang frowned and asked, "Do you know this agency?"

Zhu Guangxiao replied, "Fushun Escort Agency is the same caravan that was massacred by bandits on our way to Yunzhou. Fushun Escort Agency is also known as Fushun Trading Company."

As he spoke, he glanced at the two blaggards, Song Tingfeng and Xu Qi'an. That day, these two shirked the responsibility, leaving him to handle the aftermath.

He was in charge of returning the belongings of Zhao Long, the owner of the trading company, to his family. Following the address, he found this Fushun Escort Agency.

"Maybe they know the Inspector General is back from an inspection and came specifically to express their gratitude," a Silver Gong speculated.

If they hadn't eliminated the bandits and retrieved the goods, the Fushun Escort Agency would have probably gone bankrupt.

Therefore, it was understandable that the remaining caravan escorts and Zhao Long's family members came to see the Inspector to express their gratitude.

This was the first good deed Inspector Zhang had done since arriving in Yunzhou. He stroked his beard and smiled, "Then let them in."

Soon, three middle-aged men dressed in thick blue cotton coats with matching belts, black boots, and fur hats were led in by the Huben Guards.

Their chests were embroidered with the red characters "Fushun."

The three men were empty-handed, having had their weapons confiscated at the entrance.

Xu Qi'an squinted his eyes and scanned the three men. The bearded leader was in the Refining Qi stage, while the other two were in the Refining Vitality stage.

"Commoner Zhao Rui, the new head of Fushun Escort Agency, greets Inspector Zhang," the bearded man bowed and cupped his fists.

In Confucian etiquette, one only kneels to heaven, earth, the emperor, parents, and teachers. A commoner only needed to bow to an official, not kneel, except in court.

No wonder he is in the Refining Qi stage; he is the new head of the escort agency... Only someone in the Refining Qi stage could support a large security force... Xu Qi'an withdrew his scrutinising gaze.

Inspector Zhang nodded and asked, "What is your relationship with Zhao Long?"

Zhao Rui replied with sorrow, "Zhao Long was my elder brother. Upon hearing of his passing, my family was in mourning. I thank the Inspector for avenging my brother."

With that, he knelt and kowtowed.

Inspector Zhang accepted the kowtow calmly, planning to say a few comforting words and some pleasantries before dismissing them.

Unexpectedly, Zhao Rui, after rising, said, "I came not only to thank the Inspector but also to make a delivery."

A delivery?!

Everyone was stunned and re-examined the three men, realising they were in escort uniforms, not casual clothes.

Inspector Zhang pondered, "What do you mean?"

Zhao Rui cupped his fists, "Yesterday, a mysterious guest came to our agency, saying he wanted to send a 'package' to the Inspector General. He also said that the package contained a wanted criminal of the court and that I must deliver it personally to the Inspector..."

"This commoner knows this is not in accordance with the rules; a wanted criminal should be handed over to the authorities. But... he gave us too much money."

A wanted criminal of the court... Inspector Zhang turned to look at Jiang Lyuzhong and Xu Qi'an. Jiang Lyuzhong's eyes showed a mix of surprise and anticipation, clearly realising something.

Xu Qi'an's eyes, however, were cloudy, his pupils dilated, appearing somewhat distracted.

Choosing to advance to the Refining Spirit stage at this time is unwise... Inspector Zhang thought to himself, but then he remembered that for most people, ten days was the limit; Xu Ningyan should have advanced successfully upon arriving in Yunzhou.

Who could have predicted he would be so exceptional?

"Bring it in!" Inspector Zhang commanded in a deep voice.

Zhao Rui obeyed and, with his two companions, left the posthouse, heading straight for the carriage parked at the entrance. Around the carriage stood over a dozen strong escorts.

Seeing Zhao Rui emerge, the escorts understood and pulled a man with a sack over his head from the carriage, dragging him into the posthouse.

The man seemed to have an injured foot, limping heavily as he walked.

Once inside, everyone's eyes were fixed on the man with the sack over his head, especially Xu Qi'an and the others who knew Liang Youping's background.

Inspector Zhang stood up and, with a somewhat urgent tone, loudly said, "Quick, remove the sack..."

Without waiting for the Huben Guards, Zhao Rui swiftly pulled off the sack, revealing the man's face.

His face was thin, skin rough, and his light brown eyes sharp.

Liang Youping, the Clerk of the Military Command Office.

The one from the Qi Clique who handed the ledger to Xu Qi'an.

"So easy to find after all this effort..." Inspector Zhang murmured, taking a deep breath and ordered, "Verify his identity!"

A Bronze Gong stepped forward, pinching Liang Youping's face to examine it carefully. He reported back, "It's him."

The common disguise techniques used in the Jianghu usually involve human skin masks, which were easily detected by sharp-eyed observers due to their stiffness and lack of expression.

More advanced disguise techniques often involve high-level experts and were not easily attainable by ordinary people.

Phew... Inspector Zhang exhaled lightly, looked at Zhao Rui and his companions, and smiled, "This person is indeed a wanted criminal of the court."

He then glanced at Xu Qi'an. The latter understood immediately and hurried upstairs to drag out the three reclusive arcanists.

"Keep an eye on the three escorts downstairs and confirm if they are lying."

"Yes, Master Xu."

Downstairs, Inspector Zhang asked, "What is the identity of that mysterious guest?"

"I don't know," Zhao Rui shook his head. "He was wearing a cloak with a hood, so his identity was hidden."

"He's not lying!" The white-robed arcanists' eyes flashed with light.

This answer made sense. Regardless of the guest's purpose, he would have disguised himself when entering the escort agency. In those days, there were no regulations requiring identification for sending parcels.

As modern-day couriers without benefits or insurance, if the escorts didn't understand the unspoken rules and dared to ask for identification, they might have met a swift end.

As couriers of the day, without any benefits nor insurance, if they didn't know the rules and asked: Please give your identity and sign for the parcel — then they might have been presented with a dagger to the stomach.

"Escort Zhao!"

Xu Qi'an suddenly shouted from upstairs.

Everyone in the hall looked up.

Xu Qi'an pondered and asked, "Did that mysterious guest say anything specific?"

Zhao Rui cupped his fists and replied, "He just asked us to deliver this person to the posthouse and hand him over to the Inspector, saying he was a wanted criminal of the court."

"Anything else?" Xu Qi'an prompted, "For example: 'Picking the stars with the moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land.'"

Zhao Rui looked puzzled, "No."

"Did he turn his back on you?"

"No," Zhao Rui felt a bit frustrated. "What kind of strange questions are these?"

Xu Qi'an nodded, indicating he understood.

Xu Qi'an suspected this was all the work of the Posturing Master Yang Qianhuan, but he had no evidence.

Despite the denial of his questions, it didn't rule out Yang Qianhuan. Because once Liang Youping was delivered to the posthouse, they would certainly probe the "sender's" identity.

Although the Posturing Master seemed to have some quirks, he wasn't foolish and wouldn't leave such obvious clues.

What puzzled Xu Qi'an was why he didn't reveal himself. By rights, this kind of heroic opportunity was what Yang Qianhuan craved most.

Imagine, just as the case hit a dead end and the Inspector and others were at their wits' end, Yang Qianhuan suddenly appeared, dramatically declaring:

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

Standing proudly, with Liang Youping at his feet!

Instant fame.

The best of the best, MVP!

"Was there a compelling reason preventing you from revealing yourself?"

Inspector Zhang continued to ask probing questions before instructing the Huben Guards to see the guests out.

"Bring him to my room. I want to interrogate him personally," Inspector Zhang said with his hands behind his back, as he ascended the stairs to the second floor.

As Inspector Zhang passed Xu Qi'an, he asked, "Did you discover anything?"

"No," Xu Qi'an shook his head, then added, "They weren't lying."

Inspector Zhang nodded and said, "Follow me into the room."

Xu Qi'an, along with the three white-robed arcanists, followed Inspector Zhang into the room. Jiang Lyuzhong dragged Liang Youping in next, throwing the cripple on the floor like garbage before shutting the door behind him.

Liang Youping, with his hands bound, didn't get up. He resignedly sat on the floor.

"You are Liang Youping?" Inspector Zhang sat behind the desk, glaring sternly at the crippled former official.

"Inspector, it seems you know me quite well," Liang Youping sneered.

"You killed the butcher at Ding No. 15 Huangbo Street, disguised yourself as the contact, and handed the ledger to us to frame Yang Chuannan. Who is behind you? Confess everything," Inspector Zhang demanded in a deep voice.

"If I confess, will the Inspector spare my life?" Liang Youping sneered again.

"Death is unavoidable, but we can make your death less painful," Jiang Lyuzhong, sitting on one side and holding a cup of tea, smiled coldly:

"Otherwise we could introduce you to all the ways the Nightwatchers have of extracting information out of officials."

Chapter 224. Suicide to Escape Punishment

In the Nightwatchers Constabulary, the one in charge of interrogations was Nangong Qianrou. This sinister femboy was exceptionally cruel and has invented hundreds of inhumane torture methods, with over a hundred new torture devices crafted by artisans.

These methods had greatly enriched the torture techniques of the Great Feng.

One such method was called the Standing Punishment. A large iron weight was hung around the prisoner's neck, and over time, the prisoner's neck gradually becomes sore and painful, unable to bear the weight.

Yet the prisoner was not allowed to rest and is forced to remain standing, making life unbearable. Within two days, the prisoner usually dies in unending agony.

There was a torture method too similar to Xu Qi'an's pushing of himself to his limit in cultivating immortality, supposedly inspired by the process of achieving Refining Spirit. The excruciating pain of this method was something Xu Qi'an could sorely relate to.

He only barely managed to endure it through meditation and focus, but the suffering for an ordinary person would be unimaginable.

In Nangong Qianrou's authored **Compendium of Torture Techniques**, there were over a hundred such slow and excruciating methods.

Though Jiang Lyuzhong was not an interrogation expert like Nangong Qianrou, who was well-versed in a hundred and eight torture positions, he was familiar with several techniques from mere observation.

Liang Youping silently met Jiang Lyuzhong's gaze. Both men's eyes were sharp as eagles, but Liang Youping, who lacked significant cultivation, quickly looked away.

He averted his gaze and smiled self-deprecatingly, "It seems I have no other choice."

Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong remained silent, staring at him expressionlessly. Since he had fallen into their hands, even if he were as stubborn as a rock, they would make him talk.

Liang Youping glanced at Xu Qi'an and, patting his crippled leg, said slowly, "I wasn't lying when I said this leg was broken by someone, but the person who saved me was not Zhou Min.

"I was born in Yunzhou, and from as far back as I can remember, I knew Yunzhou was plagued by bandits, and the people suffered greatly. As a child, my dream was to learn martial arts and become a hero wielding a sword to kill bandits.

"But martial arts training is expensive, and my poor family couldn't afford it, so I turned to studying. After failing the imperial exam twice, I abandoned my studies and joined the army."

Dreams crushed by reality before they even began... Fortunately, I had my second uncle supporting me with hundreds of taels of silver every year. Otherwise, I'd have ended up like Erlang, studying endlessly... It's understandable that Aunt dislikes me.

Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly.

And given Xu Qi'an's talents, what could he achieve by studying? Probably not much more than Xu Lingyin.

"One year, in Baidi City, I saw a bureaucrat's son bullying a woman in the street. Enraged, I intervened, but I was outnumbered and his bodyguards broke my leg. Feeling annoyed, the bureaucrat's son ordered that I be taken out of the city and buried alive. It was then...

"That lord appeared. He ordered his guards to save me, arrested the bureaucrat's son, and gave me justice."

Xu Qi'an and the others realised that this "lord" was likely the one Liang Youping served, most probably the mastermind behind everything.

Liang Youping lifted his head and, meeting Inspector Zhang's gaze, said clearly, "The Governor of Yunzhou, Song Changfu."

"....."

The room fell silent.

Inspector Zhang's expression was quite peculiar—both surprised and unsurprised. After all, in Baidi City, any official above the fourth rank could be the mastermind.

The Inspector had mentally prepared for this, so there was no reaction of "great shock."

"It's him...."

However, Inspector Zhang's heart was still heavy. The Director Yang Chuannan was already implicated. Now, there's another official, the Governor, involved.

The Yunzhou bureaucracy is rotten to the core.

"Who captured you?" Xu Qi'an took the opportunity to ask.

"I don't know," Liang Youping shook his head, his face bewildered. "That day, after you left, I let go of the private prostitutes in my shop, locked up, and left. Just as I walked out of Huangbo Street, someone knocked me out.

"When I woke up, I found myself locked in a small dark room with a sack over my head, unable to call for help.... Eating, drinking, and relieving myself all in that small dark room, with someone delivering food at regular intervals. Later, I was taken to the escort agency and sent to you."

"You didn't see the person's face?" Xu Qi'an asked again.

Liang Youping shook his head.

... Liang Youping disappeared after we left, and three days later, the Church of the Warlock God interrogated him in a dream to check if he had fallen into the Nightwatcher's hands... Because during those three days, Governor Song accompanied Inspector Zhang on an inspection tour, he didn't notice Liang Youping's disappearance until they returned to Baidi City and found him missing... I understand now.

Xu Qi'an had a sudden realisation.

Inspector Zhang tapped his fingers on the table. "Continue."

"Since then, I've been following Governor Song. At that time, he wasn't yet the governor of an entire province..." Liang Youping's eyes reflected nostalgia as he spoke of the past:

"As Song Changfu's career advanced, I, a cripple, also rose in ranks, eventually becoming a Supervising Clerk, a sixth-rank official.

"It was also through Song Changfu's recommendation that I joined the Qi Clique. But this identity was hidden; Zhou Min was the Nightwatcher's undercover agent, while I was the Qi Clique's.

"The Qi Clique supplied military provisions to the mountain bandits, which had to pass through the Supervision Office. Over the years, I have been working for Song Changfu, falsifying records and embezzling military supplies..."

"Earlier, you kept saying your dream was to become a hero and kill bandits. Now, you've become an accomplice to evil." Xu Qi'an couldn't help but sneer.

Liang Youping had become the very person he once despised.

Liang Youping chose to remain silent in response to Xu Qi'an's mockery.

Inspector Zhang squinted his eyes and asked, "What about Yang Chuannan? He's also part of the Qi Clique. Why did you frame him?"

Liang Youping shook his head. "I don't know the details. I only know that he was not closely connected to the Qi Clique. Song Changfu hinted that Yang Chuannan was a pawn for the Qi Clique, one that could be discarded at any time."

A scapegoat... Xu Qi'an silently categorised Yang Chuannan as such.

"If it weren't for Zhou Min, Yunzhou's conspiracy would have continued unnoticed." Liang Youping laughed bitterly. "This might be the heavens' way of ensuring justice. I had a good relationship with Zhou Min, and we often drank together after our shifts."

"I just never thought he was an agent for the Nightwatchers, while I was the Qi Clique's agent. It just goes to show how unpredictable people's hearts are."

Liang Youping seemed to have opened a floodgate, and without needing further questioning from Inspector Zhang, he started revealing everything he knew.

"Zhou Min was a very clever person, extremely sensitive to numbers. When we noticed he had discovered discrepancies in the accounts, I personally tried to recruit him with substantial promises..."

Jiang Lyuzhong leaned comfortably in his chair. "Did he refuse?"

"No," Liang Youping chuckled. "He readily agreed to join us. But he didn't realise that the recruitment was just a façade, a test to see what he had discovered."

"Zhou Min's agreement was merely a delaying tactic. He immediately wrote a secret report exposing the issue."

Now, this is how a smart undercover agent should act... In TV dramas, the agent would have righteously refused... Xu Qi'an, trying to keep his mind sharp through sarcasm, couldn't help but say:

"He probably sensed that you would kill him to silence him."

"Smart people naturally have smart instincts. He could have tried to escape, though it wouldn't have worked." Liang Youping raised his chin.

These words seemed to refer to himself as well. He was also someone who foresaw his fate and, knowing he couldn't escape, didn't bother trying.

"After the plan was exposed, Song Changfu followed the predetermined strategy, using Yang Chuannan as a scapegoat. While secretly making arrangements, he waited for Inspector Zhang's arrival."

Inspector Zhang, hearing this, questioned, "Then why did you personally stay at the Ding No. 15 Dogmeat Shop? There must be incriminating evidence against Song Changfu in the accounts, right?"

"Yes, there are records of several military provisions being transferred from the Governor's Office to the Commander-in-Chief's Office. As for why I stayed at Ding No. 15, that was the order I received," Liang Youping answered.

...This doesn't make sense!

Xu Qi'an frowned and looked at the three white-clad arcanists. "Can we trust what he's saying?"

The three white-clad arcanists shook their heads. "We can't tell. His qi is obscured, and our techniques can't see through it."

Our techniques can't see through it... Xu Qi'an was initially surprised, then realised that someone had tampered with Liang Youping, obscuring his energy.

Number Four mentioned that arcanists have ways to counter warlocks. This obscuration must be what protected Liang Youping from curses and divination.

"Ningyan, do you have anything to say?"

Despite Xu Qi'an's reduced mental acuity, Inspector Zhang still wanted to hear his opinion.

"Having Liang Youping stay at the dogmeat shop was a mistake. I think someone as cunning as Song Changfu wouldn't make such a basic error." Xu Qi'an spoke confidently:

"Of course, it's possible this was a provocation. After all, if that mysterious expert hadn't abducted Liang Youping midway, even if we knew something was wrong, we wouldn't have found anything.

"In the end, we would have only had solid evidence to bring Yang Chuannan back to the capital."

Whether it's provocation or something else remains uncertain for now. The only way to know for sure is to confront Song Changfu directly.

As for that mysterious expert, Xu Qi'an suspected it was none other than the Master of Posturing, Yang Qianhuan. First, he only knew of this one high-ranking arcanist. Second, while there were rogue arcanists out there, few had the ability to obscure qi and fate and evade Jiang Lyuzhong's detection. Such skill wasn't something an ordinary wandering cultivator could possess.

It's like in the previous world; those who could enter the Chinese Academy of Sciences were highly educated talents, and there were no self-taught wild geniuses.

As for why he suspected Yang Qianhuan, it was simply because he could only think of him.

Hmm, this guess still needs confirmation...

"Finding out the reason isn't difficult," Inspector Zhang sneered. "Issue orders immediately, mobilise all forces, and arrest Governor Song Changfu. Remember, speed is crucial!"

Using the same tactic as with Yang Chuannan, but it works well. A surprise action can catch the enemy off guard, leaving them no time to respond.

Before long, the Huben Guards were fully mobilised. Inspector Zhang took only Jiang Lyuzhong and a few Nightwatchers with him, leaving the other Gold and Bronze Gongs to guard the post and watch over Yang Chuannan.

Xu Qi'an also stayed at the post, citing rest and recovery as the reason.

He had just fought valiantly outside the city and was now physically weakened, unsuitable for action.

...

Bang!

The main gate of the Governor's residence crashed open, and Jiang Lyuzhong led the Huben Guards into the mansion, subduing the resisting guards one by one.

Unexpectedly, Governor Song wasn't found like Yang Chuannan. Instead, the Huben Guards found him dead in his bedroom.

Governor Song was lying on the ground with a dagger in his chest. Blood had pooled around him, soaking his clothes and half his face.

"Inspector, he's dead."

After checking, the Huben Guards reported respectfully.

"Did he commit suicide to escape punishment?" Inspector Zhang walked to the corpse, his face stern.

Song Changfu was really dead?

He pondered for a moment and ordered, "Send someone to the prefecture constabulary and summon an experienced coroner to conduct an autopsy."

...

The coroner arrived quickly, accompanied by the Prefect of Yunzhou. The Prefect was visibly anxious and, upon seeing Governor Song's corpse in the bedroom, he fell to the ground in shock.

"Inspector, this, this..." The Prefect's face was pale, and his lips trembled, unable to form a complete sentence.

"Calm down." Inspector Zhang glanced at Song Changfu's corpse and then led the Prefect to the study, explaining the reversal of the case.

"So, Governor Song was the real culprit, colluding with the Church of the Warlock God and supplying military provisions to the mountain bandits?"

The Prefect was stunned, struggling to digest this shocking news.

"This matter should be announced as soon as possible to prevent unrest among the officials in Yunzhou."

Thinking from his position, Inspector Zhang was focused on stabilising the officials and maintaining order.

If Xu Qi'an were here, his priority would be to scrutinise the body and the case until there were no loose ends.

As they were speaking, a Huben Guard came in to report, "Sir, the coroner has finished the autopsy."

"Bring him in," Inspector Zhang ordered.

The coroner hurried in, head lowered.

"Report."

"Yes!" The coroner began to speak, "The deceased is Song Changfu, aged forty-five, six feet one inch tall. The head, skin, and bones show no injuries. Apart from the knife wound in the chest, there are no other injuries on the limbs and torso.

"The mouth and throat show no unusual color or smell, indicating no poisoning. The cause of death is the chest knife wound, which is self-inflicted."

Inspector Zhang nodded, "Preserve the body properly." Then he turned to the Prefect and said, "Summon all officials of rank six and above in Baidi City to the Governor's Office. I have something to announce."

After making the arrangements, Inspector Zhang frowned in thought for a long time before calling a Bronze Gong and instructing:

"Return to the post station immediately and report everything that happened here to Xu Qi'an, including the coroner's autopsy report, and get his opinion."

...

At the post station.

"What? Governor Song is dead?!"

Xu Qi'an was shocked, his eyes wide open.

"The Inspector wants to hear your opinion," the Bronze Gong who delivered the message said, sitting casually at the table, feet on a stool, sipping tea. "That Song fellow knew he was doomed when he heard us breaking in and committed suicide out of guilt. The Inspector sent me back to ask for your thoughts on this."

Yuanfang, what do you think... Xu Qi'an's mind reflexively recalled this famous line.^[^1]

Song Changfu's suicide to escape punishment was unexpected. He had hoped for a chance to confront Song Changfu in court with Liang Youping.

Xu Qi'an, feeling extremely fatigued, tried to think things through one by one:

Was it the Inspector's "speed is of the essence" strategy that made Song Changfu feel the game was up and choose suicide?

But normally, shouldn't he wait until the last moment to give up... This isn't a game where you give up just because you're at a disadvantage... His death seemed too impulsive. It could also be the mysterious Warlock of Dreams silencing him.

No, the Warlock of Dreams silencing him would require the exposure of the plot... But how would he know the plot was exposed?

Suddenly, it was as if a bolt of lightning struck Xu Qi'an's mind.

"There must be spies around the station, monitoring our every move. It could even be the fourth-rank Warlock of Dreams. When the escorts from Fushun Escort Agency brought Liang Youping in, despite being in a sack, his limp would have been obvious."

"Song Changfu must have known that Liang Youping had been captured..." Xu Qi'an concluded. He realised what was wrong.

They had been interrogating Liang Youping at the post station for over half an hour. Then, the Inspector led a team to the Governor's residence. Even with the Huben Guards' speed, it would take at least forty minutes from the post station to the Governor's residence. Would Song Changfu really sit at home and wait for death during that long period?

But Song Changfu was indeed dead, and the coroner had confirmed it... Damn it!

"Shit! It's a trap!"

Xu Qi'an blurted out.

Chapter 225. Xu Qi'an's Helpless Choice

The corpse couldn't possibly be Governor Song, because he had enough time to escape. There was no reason for him to sit at home and wait for death.

The possibility of the Warlock of Dreams silencing him is unlikely, as it hadn't reached the point where he needed to be silenced. There was ample time to retreat; there was no need to go to such extremes.

So why create the illusion of a guilty suicide?

Xu Qi'an had two guesses: First, Governor Song was also a scapegoat. Killing him to silence him would cut off the clues while fabricating the illusion of a suicide to confuse Inspector Zhang.

Second, Governor Song was stalling for time.

During previous discussions of the case, Xu Qi'an, Inspector Zhang, and others had reached a consensus that if they pushed the enemy into a corner, it would definitely result in a bloody confrontation.

Therefore, Inspector Zhang had twice launched surprise attacks, not giving the enemy a chance to react.

But this time, it seemed the enemy was a step ahead.

If it's a stall for time, then Governor Song's corpse is a fake. As an experienced coroner, how could he not detect a disguise? Unless the coroner is a werewolf...

Based on this hypothesis, the Inspector would be in danger.

At this moment, Inspector Zhang had only the Huben Guards and Jiang Lyuzhong with him. Most of the Nightwatchers were stationed at the post. Jiang Lyuzhong was formidable, but let's not forget, there was also a fourth-rank Warlock of Dreams on the enemy side.

If Jiang Lyuzhong were entangled by the Warlock of Dreams, how could the Huben Guards alone protect the Inspector?

The formidable Silver Gongs and Bronze Gongs were the backbone of this escort team.

Governor Song had been entrenched in Baidi City for many years. With Yang Chuannan now a prisoner, he had no rival among the local forces... Although he couldn't mobilize the garrison troops, the Five City Troops within the city were under the Governor's command...

Thinking of this, Xu Qi'an immediately summoned all the Nightwatchers at the post and shared his suspicions with them.

Upon hearing this, the Nightwatchers' expressions turned grave. Though some remained sceptical, considering the Inspector's safety, they preferred to believe it rather than dismiss it.

"Four of you stay behind to guard the post, the rest follow me," commanded a Silver Gong.

He glanced at Xu Qi'an, "Xu Ningyan, you stay at the post."

Everyone knew Xu Qi'an's current condition wasn't suitable for high-intensity combat. He wouldn't be able to contribute significantly in a fight.

Bringing their horses, more than a dozen Nightwatchers rode swiftly towards Song Changfu's mansion.

...

"Ningyan, why did things turn out this way?"

Song Tingfeng's face was grim, filled with unease and anxiety.

As a Bronze Gong, he wasn't privy to the case's secrets. To Song Tingfeng and other Nightwatchers, the progress of the case seemed disjointed and abrupt.

After returning from an inspection, Xu Qi'an had solved the mystery, and Inspector Zhang had arrested Commander Yang Chuannan.

After Li Miaozen visited the post, the case seemed to take a turn, but they still didn't know the specifics.

Then today, a group of escorts brought a crippled man. After the Inspector's secret interrogation, it turned out Governor Song was the mastermind.

Only just now did Xu Qi'an give a brief overview to the Nightwatchers, making everything clear.

Now aware of the case's progress and the current situation, Song Tingfeng needed time to process the sudden news.

"There's a saying that the battlefield changes in an instant. It's the same with investigations. The enemy won't wait for you to gather evidence step by step and prepare thoroughly before surrendering."

Xu Qi'an remained calm, given Jiang Lyuzhong's presence and the powerful Nightwatchers.

"Tingfeng, go out of the city immediately and find Li Miaozen. Tell her everything that happened here."

To be safe, Xu Qi'an decided to seek help from the Flying Swallow Army. Li Miaozen's private army was extremely powerful, consisting of martial experts from all over the country.

"Alright!"

Song Tingfeng got up and walked out but quickly returned, running upstairs. A few minutes later, he came down in commoner clothes.

Smart... Xu Qi'an secretly praised him while reflecting on his own oversight for not reminding him to change.

Song Tingfeng mounted a small mare that wouldn't get stuck in traffic and rode off.

But half an hour later, he galloped back, rushed into the post, and said with a grim face, "Ningyan, the city gates are closed."

... Xu Qi'an silently stared at him, feeling his heart sink to the bottom.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

Xu Qi'an couldn't sit still. He got up and started pacing in the hall.

"What could happen? Gold Gong Jiang is a fourth-rank martial artist. If thrown into the Jianghu, he would be a formidable hero. Moreover, our colleagues have also gone there," Song Tingfeng comforted.

He was also comforting himself, trying to boost his confidence.

Even with the power of the Great Feng, currently, there was only one third-rank martial artist, the Zhenbei King. A fourth-rank martial artist can indeed roam the Jianghu unchecked. Xu Qi'an had seen many fourth-rank experts in the capital, but that was the capital, the heart of the Great Feng.

Of course, the waters of the Jianghu are deep, and it could be hiding one or two old monsters deep beneath.

"The other three city gates must also be closed. Governor Song... or the Church of the Warlock God behind him, is clearly trying to trap us," Xu Qi'an paced back and forth, saying, "Have you thought about it? They must know that Gold Gong Jiang is fourth-rank, yet they still dare to act, which means they are fully prepared."

"They might have started plotting since they interrogated you and Guangxiao in the dream. We didn't lock onto Governor Song, so they could endure and stay put."

"But once we knew Governor Song was the mastermind, they would overturn the board without hesitation."

"And then?" Song Tingfeng's voice trembled, "Even if they kill the Inspector, aren't they afraid the court will send troops to annihilate them?"

"The Qi Clique and the Church of the Warlock God have been plotting for years, planning for this exact scenario," Xu Qi'an looked at him. "If not for rebellion, why would they go to such lengths?"

Song Tingfeng felt a bit panicked, but as a veteran Nightwatcher who had seen many storms, he wasn't completely lost.

"We must find a way to get the information out and mobilize the garrison troops," he said.

"The Inspector originally planned to have Gold Gong Jiang kill Xu Huchen and other officers tonight. They are lucky to have escaped."

Xu Qi'an grunted a response and then fell into deep thought.

Old Song was right. They needed to get the message out.

Yunzhou ultimately didn't belong to Song. Otherwise, the Qi Clique and the Church of the Warlock God wouldn't need to act so secretly. In Baidi City, at least, Yang Chuannan's garrison could contend with Governor Song.

Governor Song framing Yang Chuannan might have also been to eliminate dissent... Misfortune lies where fortune rests... Xu Qi'an thought of this possibility.

But Yang Chuannan was currently a prisoner, and his suspicion hadn't been cleared. Moreover, even if Xu Qi'an wanted to use him, injured Old Yang couldn't leave the city.

"What about breaking out of the city?" Zhu Guangxiao, who had been silent for a long time, suggested.

This route was very dangerous, but it was the only way he could think of.

"Currently, there are only four Bronze Gongs at the post. Facing hundreds of city guards, or even more, it's very challenging," Song Tingfeng shook his head, rejecting the idea.

The city guards weren't a disorganized mob; they were well-equipped, with crossbows and muskets. There were also probably some experts among them. Relying on just the four of them, even if they could break out of the city, it would take considerable effort.

By the time they reached the barracks, informed the Flying Swallow Army, and fought their way back... the chaos in Baidi City might already be over.

There was another way!

Xu Qi'an touched the small jade mirror in his pocket, feeling conflicted: *I really don't want to die socially...*

"I have a way to notify the Flying Swallow Army," Xu Qi'an said, then quickly added, "You don't need to ask more. Tingfeng and Guangxiao, you two stay at the post to guard Yang Chuannan and Liang Youping. If either of them makes any move, kill them immediately!"

"What do you mean by that?" Song Tingfeng was stunned.

"I have to get to the Inspector... I don't know why, but I have a bad feeling," Xu Qi'an said in a low voice.

After speaking, he left the post, grabbed a horse, and headed towards Governor Song's mansion.

The streets were bustling with people. The citizens were going about their usual activities, completely unaware of the impending upheaval.

But it had nothing to do with them. Whether Yunzhou changed rulers or not, they would continue their daily lives.

Xu Qi'an held the reins with one hand and took out a jade fragment with the other. He didn't directly message Number Two but first @ed Daoist Jinlian.

【THREE: Daoist Jinlian, have your injuries healed?】

He guessed that Daoist Jinlian's injuries should have healed by now. After all, it had been almost a month since he asked Luo Yuheng for medicine. If the injuries weren't healed by now, it would be too difficult.

【NINE: Thank you for your concern, I have long since recovered.】

"Phew..."

Xu Qi'an breathed a sigh of relief, considering it a small blessing amid the misfortune.

【THREE: Please block everyone else. I have urgent business to discuss with TWO.】

What's so secretive that Number Three needs to talk to Number Two alone?

The scattered members of the "Heaven and Earth Society," located all over the world, watched the communication in the mirror with curiosity filling their chests.

But after waiting for a long time and finding no further messages from the fragments of the Earth Book, they realized their fragments had been temporarily blocked and couldn't receive any information.

This secret technique was only mastered by the Daoists of the Earth Sect. Back then, Daoist Zilian used the same method to block them all.

"This technique is so annoying!"

The Southern Barbarian Girl angrily threw the small jade mirror on the ground. With a "boom," the ground trembled, and the jade mirror embedded itself in the earth.

【NINE: THREE, you can speak now. No one can see your messages except me and TWO.】

Have they disconnected from the network... Daoist, I actually didn't want you to see my messages either. Although you've been watching my moves coldly, the fewer people present during my social death, the better... Xu Qi'an muttered to himself, slowing his horse's pace. Using his finger as a pen, he sent a message:

【THREE: TWO, Can you see this?】

Li Miaozen, who was waiting, instantly replied to his message:

【What do you need to discuss with me?】

Using her sixth sense, she thought the matter might be related to his cousin, Xu Qi'an. Otherwise, one being in Yunlu Academy in the capital and the other in Baidi City, Yunzhou, separated by thousands of miles, what could there be to discuss?

【NINE: Do you need me to step back?】

【THREE: Yes, Daoist, thank you.】

【NINE: Heh, it seems to be an extremely important matter. Rest assured, this poor Daoist won't spread it.】

...Damn you! Xu Qi'an's face went blank.

Daoist, do you still like cats? If so, please keep that habit. I will definitely expose it in the future... Xu Qi'an took a deep breath and sent a message:

【THREE: TWO, what I'm about to say is very important. You must not hesitate or question it. Once you hear me out, act immediately.】

Also, don't pay too much attention to my social death. Old Xu still cares about face.

...

Chapter 226. Come the Warlock of Dreams

Number Three's words were strange. Although he was far away in the capital, it felt as if the situation was urgent and happening right beside her... Li Miaozen's slender, delicate eyebrows furrowed slightly.

She actually had something to do tonight. After the turmoil of the soldiers' protest during the day, with the keen intuition of a practitioner of the Heaven Sect, she vaguely sensed the killing intent hidden beneath Inspector Zhang's smiling facade.

Therefore, she planned to visit the relay station before dusk to negotiate and see if there was any room for maneuver.

But Number Three was a netizen she valued highly—honest, brave, intelligent, and wise. He was an admirable scholar. She couldn't ignore his troubles.

Just as she thought of this, a line of text slowly appeared on the mirror surface of the jade mirror:

【The true mastermind behind the Yunzhou case is Inspector Song. Inspector Zhang has uncovered the truth and originally planned to apprehend Song Changfu with lightning speed.

【But Song Changfu sensed the danger in advance, devised a plan to confuse Inspector Zhang and the Nightwatchers, and secretly sealed the city gates. Now, Baidi City is full of murderous intent, and Inspector Zhang's team is in danger. TWO, you must quickly send troops to help.】

The mastermind is Inspector Song?!

Li Miaozen felt as if she had been struck on the head with a heavy hammer and was stunned for a moment. Song Changfu was the mastermind, which meant that the Qi Clique colluding with the Church of the Warlock God was led by Song Changfu.

Song Changfu was a member of the Qi Clique?

There was no time to think about it now. If what Number Three said was true, then the turmoil in Baidi City was about to erupt, if it hadn't already.

If Inspector Zhang had an accident, the entirety of Yunzhou would slide into uncontrollable chaos. Jiang Lyuzhong was a fourth rank martial artist. Once the battle started, the common people in the city would inevitably be affected.

And this was only the beginning of the turmoil. Come spring next year, the court would definitely send a large army to attack Yunzhou. Under the flames of war, countless civilians would suffer.

Li Miaozen stood up abruptly, grabbing the silver spear leaning against the table. But then she suddenly froze.

A series of big question marks flashed through her mind, then merged into one sentence: *How does Number Three know about this?*

Number Three was far away in the capital. How did he know about what was happening in Yunzhou?

She had a vague guess, a guess that caused a great shock in her heart, no less than the shock of Song Changfu's rebellion.

So Li Miaozen paused, stood still, and sent a slightly trembling message:

【How do you know about this?】

After sending the message, no one responded for a long time.

Li Miaozen's eyebrows rose, and she turned her head to the ghost girl Susu, who was sitting by the bed reading a book, and said, "Pass my order, rally the Flying Swallow Army."

Susu's elegance while reading was like that of a gentle, well-educated, and cultured young lady. That kind of grace was engraved in her bones.

If she wasn't reading "The Romantic History of X and X," it would be perfect.

"Oh!"

Susu reluctantly put down the "Little Liu Bei" in her hand and walked out, swaying her slender waist.

She was a bit depressed. The male protagonists in the book were all handsome scholars, gentle and elegant, with vast knowledge.

And if she were to restore her physical body in the future, she would have to become a concubine for that lecherous Xu Qi'an.

The gap was too wide.

Watching the ghost maid go out to mobilize the troops, Li Miaozen, who didn't waste time, said with a stern face:

【If you don't explain, I won't send a single soldier.】

This was, of course, just a threat. Li Miaozen now wished she could sprout wings and fly to Baidi City.

【THREE: Actually, I took on a mission from the academy and secretly came to Yunzhou.】

【TWO: Do you think I'm an idiot?】

Number Three was a student of Yunlu Academy, and it was well known that the spring examination was approaching. It was the time for scholars all over the country to leap through the dragon gate.

Number Four had mentioned before that Number Three was going to take the spring examination, and Number Three had not denied it.

What could possibly make Number Three abandon his precious study time and head south? What mission from the academy was so urgent?

A student from Yunlu Academy going south yet knowing the Yunzhou case so thoroughly was too unreasonable. Unless someone leaked the information... Xu Qi'an might indeed reveal it to his cousin. If Number Three was that cousin...

There was one more way to verify if Number Three was lying, which was to ask Number One to investigate at Yunlu Academy.

But that would take too much time, and in the current situation, time was of the essence. So Number Two asked directly, hoping Number Three would tell the truth.

【THREE: Alright, I'll come clean. I am Xu Qi'an, and I am Number Three.】

Number Three is Xu Qi'an!?!

Li Miaozen turned into stone on the spot, her pretty oval face as stiff as a statue.

It felt as if something within her was collapsing, crumbling, and shattering.

An upright, kind-hearted scholar (×)

A despicable, shameless, and lecherous Nightwatcher (√)

The image of Number Three in her mind went through a collapse, reorganization, and a series of processes.

Upon hearing the bad news, Li Miaozen's anger surged. She felt deceived, her feelings toyed with, treated like a fool.

To be honest, she had a good impression of Number Three. He wasn't as deep-minded as Number One, who always loved to lurk. He wasn't as seemingly gentle yet extremely proud as Number Four.

As for Numbers Five, Six, and Nine, they each had their characteristics, but in terms of overall impression, none were as good as Number Three.

But it was all a lie.

At this moment, Li Miaozen recalled Number Three's evaluation of Xu Qi'an.

"Shameless, absolutely shameless..." She tightly gripped her silver spear, her chest heaving violently.

In modern terms, Li Miaozen would be the protagonist of a legal drama, with the headline: "Eighteen-Year-Old Girl Deceived by Online Lover."

Wait!

Amid her anger, Li Miaozen suddenly remembered something unpleasant:

If Number Three was Xu Qi'an, then when she earnestly sought help from the Earth Book group to analyze the case...

And the next day, proudly boasting in front of Inspector Zhang and Xu Qi'an that she had solved the case...

Thinking of this, Li Miaozhen's chest heaved even more violently, her face turning red with embarrassment, feeling the urge to draw her sword and end it all.

At that time, Xu Qi'an must have been laughing at her in his heart.

She covered her face with her hands, her voice trembling, "Bastard..."

...

Far away in the capital, Daoist Jinlian stared at the fragment of the Earth Book, waiting for a long time, but Number Three and Number Two did not continue their conversation.

"At least let me know when your private chat is over," Daoist Jinlian complained.

Xu Qi'an, that brat, always boasted without any sense of caution. Now, his identity was exposed, and he must be feeling ashamed.

But this was nothing. Daoist Jinlian had cultivated for decades and had seen all kinds of storms and waves. He wouldn't lose his composure over such a small matter.

"Hehehe..."

A few minutes later, an orange cat jumped onto the courtyard wall, cautiously peering inside, seemingly planning to sneak into the kitchen to steal food.

But then, the orange cat suddenly froze, staying still on the wall. A few seconds later, its amber eyes regained their liveliness, and it happily walked away, tail up.

Inside the house, Daoist Jinlian lay on the bed, his face serene.

...

Xu Qi'an took one last look at the jade mirror. Number Two did not ridicule, blame, or curse him but instead maintained an eerie silence.

Somewhat unexpected, yet anticipated.

"She probably remembered the boastful things she said that day. This is the benefit of us all being in the same boat," Xu Qi'an thought.

Then, he calmed his mind, focused his spirit, and called out to Monk Shenshu in his mind, "Master, Master..."

"Master, I am in a crisis and hope to get your help."

He called Monk Shenshu for a long time, but there was no response.

Xu Qi'an started to panic. The reason he dared to rush to the scene first was that he had confidence—Shenshu was his confidence.

Back then, the two had agreed that Xu Qi'an would offer his body to nurture the broken arm, and Monk Shenshu would help him in critical moments.

But now, it seemed his "cheat" had run away?

"From death comes rebirth."

In his mind, the ethereal voice of Master Shenshu came through.

From death comes rebirth? What do you mean? Are you helping me or not?

Xu Qi'an tried to communicate with Monk Shenshu again, but the damned monk had gone back to sleep and couldn't be awakened.

...

At the rear courtyard of the Commissioner of Civil Affairs' office.

Clanging and banging came from the Huben Guards searching for evidence. Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong stood in the courtyard, with the Prefect of Yunzhou standing respectfully by.

Inspector Zhang smelled a faint fragrance, unlike plum blossoms, a scent he had never encountered before.

In his search, he easily found the source—a white flower that looked no different from the wildflowers by the roadside, but it emitted a rich and lingering fragrance.

"In the middle of winter, there's a flower blooming?" Inspector Zhang remarked in surprise.

The Prefect glanced at it and, not caring much, shook his head, "It must be a special variety. I don't recognize it, but Commissioner Song—well, Song the traitor—was a flower lover."

Inspector Zhang nodded slightly.

The Huben Guards found no useful evidence.

"Strange..." Inspector Zhang frowned.

The Song residence and the Commissioner of Civil Affairs' office were too clean, as if deliberately tidied up, leaving no incriminating evidence.

However, Song Changfu's actions might be concealed elsewhere. It's not surprising they couldn't find evidence.

Before long, the summoned officials gathered at the office.

...

In the main hall, Inspector Zhang stood under the eaves, hands behind his back. In the courtyard, over a dozen high-ranking officials stood in two rows, silently observing him.

"Gentlemen!"

Inspector Zhang's sharp gaze swept over the officials, his voice stern, "Song Changfu colluded with the Church of the Warlock God, embezzled military supplies, and harboured bandits. The livelihood of the people around Yunzhou has deteriorated, and unrest is frequent.

"I am here by the Emperor's decree to investigate thoroughly. After the incident, Song Changfu committed suicide to escape punishment.

"From today, this official will handle all military and political affairs in Yunzhou. Those who colluded with this traitor must immediately report to me. Their punishment will depend on the severity of their involvement."

"Sir yes sir!"

The officials bowed.

Just then, Inspector Zhang saw a group of Nightwatchers rushing into the hall, led by a Silver Gong carrying someone.

The officials looked towards the commotion.

"Why are they here?" Inspector Zhang looked at Jiang Lyuzhong beside him.

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head.

"Inspector, we have a serious problem."

The Silver Gong, even before reaching the front, shouted urgently.

Jiang Lyuzhong squinted, recognizing the person in the Silver Gong's hand—it was the coroner from the yamen.

"What's going on?"

Inspector Zhang's gaze fell on the coroner, his expression turning grave.

The Silver Gong handed the coroner to a Bronze Gong, quickly stepped forward, and whispered in Inspector Zhang's ear.

After hearing Xu Qi'an's analysis, the Nightwatchers hurried to Commissioner Song's residence, only to find it empty, with the Inspector already gone.

Inquiring at the residence, they learned the Inspector had gone to the Commissioner of Civil Affairs' office.

The experienced Silver Gongs, remembering Xu Qi'an's analysis, reexamined Song Changfu's corpse and discovered the bloodstained face was a human skin mask.

The deceased was indeed not Song Changfu.

The Nightwatchers immediately apprehended the coroner and rushed to the Commissioner of Civil Affairs' office.

"I see!"

Inspector Zhang's expression changed from shock to seriousness, then to a calm, expressionless demeanor.

He slowly scanned the officials, looked at the coroner, and asked, "Who instructed you?"

The coroner was terrified, frequently glancing towards the back, where the Prefect of Yunzhou stood.

"Your Excellency, it was me," the Prefect said, bowing his hands, admitting calmly.

Inspector Zhang snorted coldly and, without wasting words, waved his hand, "Arrest him..."

His hand barely moved, a simple gesture, yet it felt like lifting a thousand pounds.

Immediately, he fell limply to the ground. Jiang Lyuzhong instinctively tried to support him but stumbled. The dignified Fourth Stage martial artist was dragged down by Inspector Zhang.

Poisoned... Jiang Lyuzhong realized.

"Inspector! Gold Gong Jiang!"

The Nightwatchers were alarmed, rushing forward.

In the courtyard, the officials were panicked. At this moment, the Prefect of Yunzhou seemed so unfamiliar to them.

"Bastard!"

A Bronze Gong drew his sword, ready to kill the Prefect.

The prefect's face was expressionless as he raised his hand to form a seal.

"Hehehe..." The coroner, who had been thrown to the ground, suddenly transformed. His muscles swelled, his eyes turned red, and a beast-like growl erupted from his throat as he charged at the Bronze Gong who had drawn his sword.

Slash!

The sword cut into the coroner's shoulder, severing his entire arm, but he seemed unfazed, crashing into the Bronze Gong's arms.

Everyone heard the sound of bones cracking.

The Bronze Gong was sent flying, his sword clattering to the ground.

The quick-witted Nightwatchers caught him, but it couldn't change the outcome. The light in the Bronze Gong's eyes dimmed rapidly as his life extinguished.

"A Warlock of Dreams!" Jiang Lyuzhong said sternly. "So you're the fourth rank Warlock of Dreams of the Church of the Warlock God. Did you kill Zhou Min?"

The prefect smiled, "Indeed!"

"Ah..." The officials quickly retreated, watching the prefect warily.

The mysterious Warlock of Dreams had been hiding among them all along? What method did he use to evade the Sitianjian's Qi-watching technique?

The coroner, now a red-eyed, feral being, picked up his severed arm and pressed it to the stump.

Scarlet, pulsing veins shimmered, blood-red threads binding the arm back together.

A Blood Puppet!

This was a secret technique controlled by Ninth Grade warlocks, capable of refining living beings into puppets and, at the cost of burning their own blood, turning them into fearless warriors with unparalleled combat strength.

Therefore, Ninth Grade warlocks were also called "Blood Spirits."

Of course, the enhancement of a puppet's combat power by a Ninth Grade Arcanist was limited and couldn't extend to reattaching limbs.

"What poisoned me?" Jiang Lyuzhong seemed unwilling to accept his fate.

"This poison is called Pine Flower White Worm. When the worms are burned, they release a colourless, odourless poison. It won't affect the body immediately but will linger for up to ten days. During this period, if the poisoned person smells a flower called the Pine Flower, their body will become weak and powerless, like a lamb to the slaughter. This is a poison from the Southern Marches' Shaman Tribes.

"Jiang Lyuzhong, to deal with you, I spared no effort. As a high-rank martial artist, ordinary poisons are ineffective on you and easily detected. Only this combination of Shaman poison, with its gentle and lingering nature, could ensnare you." The prefect looked proud.

Inspector Zhang weakly gasped, "The flower in the rear courtyard?"

"Exactly."

"So, you deliberately led us to the rear courtyard."

"Your intelligence, Inspector, came a bit too late." The prefect sneered.

"And the poison of the white worm?"

"The candles you've been burning every day. You guarded against everything but never thought the poison would be in the candles. During your inspections, the candles in the relay stations were quietly swapped."

It was impossible to guard the relay stations at all times, especially during inspections, making it easy to switch the candles.

Inspector Zhang forced himself to ask, "Where is Song Changfu?"

"Once you're all dead, he'll take over the Yunzhou officialdom," the prefect said coldly. "After taking control of Baidi City, the bandits stored in various places will attack the prefectures and counties. By the end of the year, Yunzhou will split from the Great Feng."

At this moment, they heard the sound of loud, chaotic footsteps approaching.

"The poison will subside after two sticks of incense, but unfortunately, you won't live that long." The prefect laughed.

Chapter 227. The Sacrifice

The sounds of battle erupted immediately as the Huben Guards and the traitors from the Five Cities garrison clashed outside. The twang of bowstrings, the crack of muskets, and the clash of swords echoed clearly in everyone's ears.

With rebels outside and a Warlock of Dreams nearby, the situation seemed hopeless. The Nightwatchers' faces turned grim as their hearts sank.

Fortunately, they were all experienced Nightwatchers, accustomed to bloodshed and slaughter, and their minds remained resolute.

"Escort Gold Gong Jiang and the Inspector General into the inner hall," Silver Gong Zhao shouted, drawing his sword.

Jiang Lyuzhong grabbed Zhao's sleeve, wanting to say something, but Zhao spoke first.

"Boss, I understand. Dream Warlocks aren't skilled in close combat. As long as we avoid giving him hair or flesh, he can't use his curse techniques."

Silver Gong Tang grinned, "Yeah, boss. We can't beat a Fourth Grade warrior, but we can't handle a Fourth Grade Warlock of Dreams? That would be too embarrassing."

Seeing their superiors so confident, the Bronze Gongs relaxed slightly.

They knew the Warlock of Dreams had strange and bizarre methods but were not good at direct combat.

To their surprise, Jiang Lyuzhong didn't let go. This usually godlike Gold Gong could barely stand, yet he still clung tightly to Zhao's sleeve.

"Go!" Jiang Lyuzhong said.

Zhao turned back and grinned, "Boss, you want us to take the Inspector General and leave, but we can't do that."

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head, "You can't escape with the Inspector General. I'm telling you to go."

"Gold Gong Jiang, how do we know we'll lose if we don't fight?" a Bronze Gong shouted, trying to encourage himself.

Silver Gong Zhao jerked his sleeve back, causing Jiang Lyuzhong to stumble.

Silver Gong Tang caught him and sighed, "When we get back to the capital, boss, you owe us a drink."

The last Silver Gong said nothing, only clasped his fists towards Jiang Lyuzhong.

Zhao raised his sword with one hand and his crossbow with the other, pulling the trigger. The bowstring twanged, and the arrow shot out.

Thwack, thwack, thwack...

The other Nightwatchers followed suit, lifting their crossbows to shoot.

The transformed coroner, now a puppet, roared and blocked the arrows for the prefect. The arrows pierced his body, the tips protruding from his back.

"Die!"

Silver Gong Zhao leaped high, the limestone bricks cracking underfoot, and flew over fifty metres. The air around his sabre twisted with energy.

Slash!

The puppet was cut in half, blood spurting and trying to reassemble, but failing.

The Warlock of Dreams-prefect dodged the blade's edge, the sharp energy tearing the ground, extending to the steps at the hall entrance with a loud bang.

The other two Silver Gongs' attacks followed, sprinting low and dragging shadows, coordinating to strike at the Warlock of Dreams.

As they attacked, information about the warlock system flashed in their minds.

The Great Feng occasionally clashed with the Church of the Warlock God. Information on warlocks below and including Fourth Grade was detailed in the Nightwatchers' archives.

Ninth rank warlocks could turn living people into puppets, using secret techniques to burn their own blood, giving ordinary people immense strength. The more power they gained, the faster their blood burned until they died.

They could also boost their companions' potential at the cost of burning blood, earning the name "Blood Spirits."

Eighth rank warlocks mastered curses, using birthdates, horoscopes, personal items, and bodily fluids to kill targets. They were called "Master of Curses."

Their strength was in their mysteriousness, making them hard to guard against.

Their weakness was that they could only curse targets weaker than themselves.

Seventh rank warlocks, known as "Spirit Mediums," could control corpses and spirits. Both the Great Feng and northern Yao tribes suffered at the hands of Spirit Mediums on the battlefield.

Sixth rank warlocks, called "Masters of Divination," excelled in divination, avoiding misfortune. The warlocks of this rank could be described by one word: cautious!

Fifth rank warlocks, "Miracle Priests," could summon ancestral war spirits to possess them. If the spirit was a warrior, the priest became a warrior, and so on.

The restriction was that they could only summon spirits of the same rank.

Fourth Grade warlocks, like the prefect, were "Warlock of Dreams," able to walk in dreams and kill invisibly. The best way to deal with them was to avoid sleeping.

"Don't give him time to set up a ritual or summon a war spirit, and we can win!" Zhao encouraged himself.

Suddenly, he heard a murmuring voice and turned sharply. An overlooked official was cutting his wrist, drawing a complex pattern with blood on the ground while chanting obscure syllables.

Zhao's heart sank.

The next moment, a strong energy emerged from the prefect, a wisp of black smoke forming above his head, vaguely resembling a human figure.

Simultaneously, the two Silver Gongs' blades struck.

The blades cut the prefect's clothes, clashing against his skin with a metallic sound. The black smoke above him wavered.

Bronze Skin and Iron Bones.

"Who said only warlocks could set up rituals? Puppets can too," the Warlock of Dreams-prefect sneered, grabbing the two Silver Gongs by the neck.

With a "crack," both Silver Gongs died instantly.

A fourth rank warrior killing two Silver Gongs was as easy as crushing ants.

"Bastard!"

A heart-wrenching roar came from the hall, like an old beast's desperate howl.

It was Jiang Lyuzhong, his eyes red and face twisted with helpless anger.

The surviving Bronze Gongs were terrified, finally realising that the Silver Gongs had just been boosting morale.

Warlocks might not be good at close combat, but a Fourth rank was still a Fourth rank, an insurmountable gap. Their lack of close combat was relative to other systems of the same grade.

"Are you scared?"

Zhao shouted, jolting the Bronze Gongs.

At that moment, this Silver Gong, proficient in all vices, still held his battle blade high, like a warrior facing death calmly.

"Two sticks of incense. We need to buy Gold Gong Jiang two sticks of incense's time. It's still early," Zhao shouted.

"Riffraff."

But reality was harsh. The Warlock of Dreams disguised as the prefect raised his hand, gathering energy in his palm, and pressed down.

A shockwave spread through the air like ripples.

Zhao and the other Nightwatchers were hit in the chest, spitting blood as they flew back.

With a single move, the Warlock of Dreams incapacitated them all.

Jiang Lyuzhong seemed to expect this, closing his eyes. He was no longer angry, knowing they would soon meet in another world.

The Warlock of Dreams clenched his fist, knowing his time with the war spirit was limited. He didn't intend to waste words with Jiang Lyuzhong.

The real task lay ahead: taking Baidi City, gathering bandits, attacking prefectures, and counties, and conquering Yunzhou before the court could react.

The Church of the Warlock God had plotted for years; today was the day to reap the rewards.

A punch roared out, qi battering the air, producing a deep, frightening roar, aimed at the hall.

A figure stood in the way—Silver Gong Zhao. He gripped his long sword with both hands, lowered his stance, and slashed out with a roar.

It was the most powerful slash of his life.

Sword qi collapsed, the long sabre shattered, the silver gong at his chest breaking into a myriad pieces. The frightening surge of energy pushed Silver Gong Zhao into the great hall, as the entire building shook.

Jiang Lyuzhong's heart also trembled as he hurriedly crawled over and cradled his dying subordinate in his arms.

The moment he touched Silver Gong Zhao, Jiang Lyuzhong knew there was no hope of saving him. Every bone in his body was shattered, and his internal organs were equally devastated.

Perhaps the Sitianjian had miraculous cures that could bring back the dead, but there were none in Yunzhou.

The only reason Silver Gong Zhao hadn't died immediately was likely due to the last stubbornness of a martial artist.

Silver Gong Zhao had always been a very stubborn person, often acting against Jiang Lyuzhong's orders, just as he had forcefully shaken off his hand earlier.

"Do you have any last words?" Jiang Lyuzhong asked softly.

Silver Gong Zhao's bloodied face forced a smile, his mouth full of blood, and he spoke haltingly, "Boss, actually, I took another concubine this year, she's eighteen, so young and tender.

"But I was afraid you'd find out, so I didn't keep her at home. You often summon us Silver Gongs for meetings and repeatedly order that we can't embezzle more than five hundred taels a year, extort more than ten cents from peddlers, or more than three cash from shops and taverns.

"You know, we secretly laugh at you, for setting rules even for corruption. There's no one else like you in the whole world. On the surface, we follow your orders, but behind your back, we embezzle as we please. How else could we afford so many concubines? Sorry, Boss, for disappointing you.

"So, don't be sad for people like us. According to the rules set by Duke Wei, I should be dragged to the marketplace and beheaded.

"Old Tang likes to drink. If you survive, remember to pour him a few extra cups every Qingming.

"And one last request... I don't want to die in a foreign land, take me back to the capital."

The light in Silver Gong Zhao's eyes faded.

"Aye!" Inspector Zhang sighed deeply, blaming himself, "It's my fault, I was careless..."

"What's the use of saying that now?"

Jiang Lyuzhong said this with a smile, but the sorrow in his eyes couldn't be hidden, flowing out as hot tears.

The Warlock of Dreams walked over slowly, laughing heartily, "To be honest, we didn't plan to split Yunzhou, support bandits, and hoard troops. It was just a contingency plan, to be used at the most critical time, not now.

"Though that guy surnamed Zhou discovered the account book issue, according to our plan, we would have just pushed Yang Chuannan out to take the blame.

"I didn't expect the Qi Clique to be so foolish, exposing our cooperation. They drew you here.

“What surprised me even more was that a mere Bronze Gong managed to disrupt my plans to this extent. I had no choice but to attack you, to prematurely occupy Yunzhou. Blame that Bronze Gong if you must, if it weren't for him ruining things, you wouldn't have to die.

"Now, you go first. I'll find that Bronze Gong and kill him."

As soon as he finished speaking, two arrows flew towards him. The Warlock of Dreams raised his hand and shattered the arrows.

On the wall, a tall and proud Bronze Gong stood, holding a military crossbow given by Song Qing of the Sitianjian. But now, it was just a normal weapon.

It could only be fired three times in its lifetime.

"‘That Bronze Gong’ — Is my name so worthless to you?"

He had blood on him, but it wasn't his own. He had fought his way here.

Xu Qi'an finished speaking, his gaze falling on the two dead Silver Gongs and the injured Bronze Gongs. The playful and mischievous air he usually had suddenly vanished.

His eyes darkened, his face expressionless.

...

At the West Gate, a silver light descended from the sky, striking the city wall with a loud crash, sending bricks flying and dust rising.

Wearing fish-scale armor, her hair tied in a high ponytail, with a crimson cloak billowing behind her, Li Miaozen stood on the spear shaft, staring at the soldiers ready to shoot.

She said in a deep voice, "Why is the gate closed?"

Number Three... That bastard Xu Qi'an was right, the gate was indeed closed. But Li Miaozen didn't recklessly break in, she landed on the wall to question them.

"Kill her!" A commander drew his sword and pointed at Li Miaozen.

They didn't explain, just attacked.

There was nothing more to say. Li Miaozen's eyes turned cold.

The bowstrings twanged, and dozens of arrows shot towards her.

She didn't dodge. With a flick of her hand, a gust of wind emerged from her bag, wrapping around the arrows and altering their paths.

The arrows brushed past Li Miaozen, turning the archers into outline artists.

"Clang!"

The flying sword at Li Miaozen's waist unsheathed, transforming into a silver lightning that darted through the necks of the soldiers, reaping their lives.

The sound of hooves echoed, and the Flying Swallow Army charged, kicking up clouds of dust.

Four centurions of the Bronze-Skin Iron-Bones realm led the Refining Spirit realm officers onto the wall, assisting Li Miaozen's flying sword in clearing the soldiers.

"Master, you haven't used the flying sword for a long time..." The female ghost Susu floated down onto the spear shaft, hugging Li Miaozen from behind.

The flying sword was a weapon given to Li Miaozen by the Heaven Sect. She rarely used it, but every time she did, it meant she was in a very bad mood.

"I'm very angry," Li Miaozen said.

"Because the Inspector was ambushed?"

"No, because of a bastard."

"....."

Susu frowned, hesitant to speak. Had Li Miaozen forgotten she was the Holy Maiden of the Heaven Sect? The Heaven Sect's principle was to be free of emotions, but in the years since she descended the mountain, Li Miaozen had become more impulsive and fiercely opposed to injustice.

She had turned herself into the righteous Lady Flying Swallow.

The title Lady Flying Swallow partly came from her flying sword's swiftness, and partly from her righteous nature. Wherever there was injustice, she would fly there.

The Flying Swallow Army once again demonstrated their unbeatable prowess, swiftly clearing the wall and then breaking open the gate under the lead of a bronze skin iron bones martial artist.

Li Miaozen leaped down, pulling out the spear, and with it, landed on the ground.

Under her lead, the Flying Swallow Army stormed into the city.

...

"Heaven had a path for you laid out, yet you decided to break into hell instead" The Warlock of Dreams laughed after a brief moment of shock.

Xu Qi'an leaped down, holding the black-gold long blade given to him by the Jianzheng, gritting his teeth, "The one who should go to hell is you, you son of a bitch."

"Xu Ningyan, why are you here?" Jiang Lyuzhong's face changed, "Are you here to die? You can't save us, go, leave now."

Do you think I still can... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

He really couldn't leave. The Warlock of Dreams had locked onto him, preparing to strike.

"Ningyan, why..." Inspector Zhang closed his eyes, "Why do this?"

Xu Qi'an wasn't panicking, he was communicating with the monk in his heart:

"Master, help me kill this person."

"Master?"

"Damn it, Master, are you there? Don't mess with me now."

"Master, damn it..."

The fist wind came roaring, the sound of thunder in his ears.

At this moment, a sigh echoed through the hall: "Picking the stars with the moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land."

Under Xu Qi'an's feet, a formation lit up, raising a translucent barrier.

"Boom!"

The qi exploded on the surface of the barrier, the blast was deafening, and the stone bricks on the ground lifted instantly, creating a terrifying scene.

Half of the Prefect Manor hall collapsed with a rumble.

After a long ringing in his ears, Xu Qi'an heard Jiang Lyuzhong's roar, "Yang Qianhuan, you're also in Yunzhou! Why did you stand by and watch, why didn't you act earlier?"

Xu Qi'an turned abruptly and saw a figure in white standing with his hands behind his back, facing away from them.

Xu Qi'an wasn't surprised by Yang Qianhuan's appearance, he just wanted to say, "You motherfucker, you finally showed up."

Xu Qi'an had long suspected that the arcanist who had abducted Liang Youping was one of Sitianjian's senior brothers, most likely Yang Qianhuan.

Sure enough.

In my life, I, Yang, never need to explain my actions to others. This thought flashed through Yang Qianhuan's mind, but he didn't say it aloud. Instead, he sighed and explained, "I came to Yunzhou under the orders of my master. I was not here just now."

The Jianzheng had tasked him with: Keeping an eye on Xu Qi'an.

Wherever Xu Qi'an was, he would be.

He wasn't present when the Silver Gongs were killed.

"I'll take you away," Yang Qianhuan's footwork expanded, enveloping Xu Qi'an, Inspector Zhang, and others.

"Hmph!"

The Warlock of Dreams shattered the formation with a single step, "Yang Qianhuan, you are not qualified to save people from me."

Yang Qianhuan responded, "Picking the stars with the moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land."

"Arrogant!" The Warlock of Dreams' goat whisker beard trembled as if enraged.

"Go or not?" Yang Qianhuan's voice rang in Xu Qi'an's ears, "I can only take you, too many people will cause the formation to break."

Xu Qi'an grinned, "There's another way, take this guy out."

"There are hundreds of rebels outside." Yang Qianhuan warned.

"I know." Xu Qi'an replied.

After a brief silence, Yang Qianhuan said, "Alright."

He stomped hard, the formation quickly spread, this time enveloping only the Warlock of Dreams. Just as the Warlock reacted, the two disappeared.

"Fight outside of the city." Xu Qi'an shouted to the sky.

There was no reply.

Xu Qi'an brought the bodies of the two Silver Gongs into the hall and gently placed them at Jiang Lyuzhong's feet, "Sorry, I was late."

"You shouldn't have come." Jiang Lyuzhong said in a low voice.

But I still came... Xu Qi'an wanted to make a joke, but the words turned into a bitter smile.

The Bronze Gongs helped each other into the inner hall, sitting down to meditate and heal.

Jiang Lyuzhong glanced at the surviving Bronze Gongs, feeling somewhat relieved, but the faint sounds of fighting outside were ending, making him realise they weren't out of danger yet.

"What's the situation outside?" Inspector Zhang looked towards the hall entrance.

"Probably four or five hundred rebels left. When I fought my way in, the Huben Guards were almost wiped out."

The Bronze Gongs opened their eyes wide, their expressions filled with despair.

"Forget it, forget it..." Inspector Zhang laughed bitterly, "It seems there's no escape, I have failed the emperor and Duke Wei's trust."

"You didn't fail them, you failed these three dead Silver Gongs." Xu Qi'an glanced at him, then walked to the threshold.

"Ningyan, go. With your strength, you can escape from the back hall." Jiang Lyuzhong, eyes red, urged, "Go, go quickly. Today, I will die here with my subordinates. If you die here, Duke Wei will dig up my grave."

"There's hope. As long as we hold on, reinforcements will come." Xu Qi'an could already see the figures of the rebels, they were making their way closer.

He turned back, bowing to Inspector Zhang, "Inspector General Sir, you are a good official, even though you have your own schemes, you put the people first. I hate this world, but seeing good officials like you makes me happy. So I don't want you to die."

Then he bowed to Jiang Lyuzhong, "You are a good superior, a master of drinking and flowers at Jiaofangsi. If there's a chance, I'll take you to Jiaofangsi again, any oiran except Fuxiang, of course."

He looked at the bodies of the three Silver Gongs, "No matter what kind of people they were in life, at least in death, they didn't disgrace the Nightwatcher title."

Finally, he cupped his fists above his head, "Duke Wei has treated me with great kindness, favoring me everywhere. I can't charge forward in times of benefit and hide in times of danger."

With that, he closed the hall door.

Jiang Lyuzhong was moved, hoarsely shouting, "Ningyan!"

A Bronze Gong's lips trembled, murmuring, "It's impossible, impossible, he's breaking through to Refining Spirit, he can't hold on...."

Inspector Zhang struggled to stand, weak as he was, but he stood firmly, bowing deeply towards Xu Qi'an's back.

They couldn't see what was happening outside, but amidst the sounds of crossbows firing, weapons clashing, and chaotic shouts, a young, impassioned chant reached them:

A young man's valour, brings heroes from five capitals old!

“*With loyal heart, with just hand. With words of iron, life or death,*

“*A promise is worth a thousand tons of gold!*

.....

Xu Qi'an stood by the courtyard entrance, as his blade rose and fell, rose and fell... when a rebel soldier came, he cut them down.

Armor seemed like paper against the Jianzheng's long sabre alone flesh and blood.

At first, he felt uneasy, terrified by the blood on his hands, but after killing many, he became numb.

The rebels were mostly ordinary people, with a few Refining Vitality experts. For Xu Qi'an, who was half a step into Refining Spirit, there wasn't much difference.

But the endless waves of enemies, coupled with his poor state, wore him down. After slaying dozens, Xu Qi'an became exhausted, his stomach churned, and his arms went numb.

The most troublesome were the crossbows, their dense volleys impossible to block with a single blade.

Fortunately, the magic bronze gong on his chest protected him from most attacks, leaving the rest to his reflexes.

After beheading fifty enemies, Xu Qi'an reached his first limit. His vitality depleted, vision blurred, and he felt on the verge of collapse.

Yet, pushing through this limit, he found to his surprise his dry pool of vitality suddenly welled up with newfound energy, nourishing his spirit.

The surroundings became clearer, every detail of the soldiers' faces, their taut muscles, the arcs of their swinging swords... all vividly imprinted in his mind.

...Is this the Refining Spirit stage, perceiving everything around?

No, not yet, I can push further.

From death comes rebirth!

Xu Qi'an suddenly understood Shenshu's meaning.

The relentless exhaustion of the primordial spirit itself is a kind of rebirth from death. But it is not enough. If the primordial spirit is likened to an iron billet, an ordinary warrior advancing to the Refining Spirit stage is like striking the hammer once.

Xu Qi'an, however, was repeatedly hammering, tempering his primordial spirit, breaking through the limits on the edge of life and death each time.

After beheading a hundred people, he faced the limit again. After forcing himself through, new springs gushed forth, and his spiritual power advanced rapidly once more.

No, I can't hold on much longer... Damn monk, I'm leaving my life to you, don't trick me... There are still many beautiful girls waiting for me in the capital...

After slaying two hundred people, the new springs stopped gushing forth.

Because Xu Qi'an had reached his limit.

Because the exhaustion had caught up with him.

The rapid growth of the spirit had nothing to do with the physical body. Each time he exhausted his spirit, he also exhausted his body. The spirit could well, but the body could not.

Finally, this god of death laid down his blade, leaning on its slender form.

The rebels did not dare continue. Their swords were tightly gripped, their expressions twisted, cautious, scared.

Scared of what he had just done.

"Shoot him with crossbows," a loud voice shouted from the crowd.

Thrum... The bowstrings vibrated, and crossbow bolts shot out. Whether due to exhaustion or tension, the bolt that was aimed at Xu Qi'an's forehead missed, grazing his scalp.

But the rebels cheered.

"He's dead, he's dead... Hahaha, this bastard is finally dead!"

"Chop him up, chop him up to avenge our brothers."

They surged forward.

At this moment, a flying sword pierced through the air, slicing through the crowd and killing the soldiers at the forefront.

Immediately after, four warriors like deities broke through the wall, leading a group of armored soldiers into the courtyard.

At this time, the rebels still had over three hundred people, but against this heavenly army, they fared no better than chaff. Lives were harvested one by one, and soldiers fell, the thick smell of blood making people nauseous.

The Flying Swallow Army, after clearing the rebels, witnessed an unforgettable scene.

At the courtyard entrance, a young man stood proudly, his body full of arrows, standing on a mountain of corpses, leaning on his sword.

Lifeless.

Li Miaozhen, cloaked in crimson, stood in front of him, her figure seeming somewhat desolate.

Full of resentment and anger, Li Miaozhen had imagined that when they met again, she would fiercely teach him a lesson. But now, she felt a lump in her throat.

Li Miaozhen, with reddening eyes, said, "I'm sorry, I came late."

"Miaozhen..."

A centurion walked over, but his gaze lingered on Xu Qi'an.

Clang... He stood straight, his armor clinking as he cupped his fists towards Xu Qi'an.

Clang, clang... The sound of armor clinking spread as over four hundred Flying Swallow soldiers cupped their fists in unison.

They didn't even know who this young man was or what his name was, but they respected him from the bottom of their hearts.

"Go in and see if the Inspector is alive or dead," Li Miaozhen's voice was somewhat hollow.

"Yes!"

The centurion bypassed Xu Qi'an and rushed into the courtyard.

In the crowd, the stunningly beautiful Su Su stood quietly in the corner, staring blankly at Xu Qi'an.

"Are you an idiot...."

.....

Bang...

The centurion pushed open the door, seeing the Nightwatchers sitting cross-legged on the ground and the pale but unharmed Inspector Zhang.

Despair was evident on their faces.

The centurion was stunned and quickly said, "I am Li Hu, a centurion of the Flying Swallow Army. You are safe now."

Flying Swallow Army?!

The Nightwatchers looked at each other, puzzled as to why the Flying Swallow Army appeared here, but the sounds of fighting outside had indeed ceased.

They were safe.

A reprieve from the brink of death.

"Whew..." Inspector Zhang staggered, finally relaxing his tense nerves. He had to lean on the table to keep from falling.

"Where is Ningyan...?" Inspector Zhang asked, "Where is that Bronze Gong outside?"

The surviving Nightwatchers all looked over.

The centurion suddenly felt evasive, not daring to meet their eyes, filled with hope and longing for good news.

"He... died in battle."

.....

Inspector Zhang stumbled out of the hall, crossed the courtyard, and came to Xu Qi'an.

But what he saw was only a broken human form, covered in arrows and blade wounds, without any sign of life.

Inexplicably, he heard the young man's final chant in his ears:

A young man's valour, brings heroes from five capitals old!

With loyal heart, with just hand. With words of iron, life or death,

A promise is worth a thousand tons of gold!

At this moment, the Inspector collapsed to the ground, tears streaming down his face.

...

Outside the City

Rows of bed ballista fired, the sound of bowstrings echoing sharply, and cannons roared, their thunderous booms deafening.

At Yang Qianhuan's feet, various formations and patterns lit up, each with different functions. Sometimes they enveloped arrows in a whirlwind, increasing their penetration or altering their trajectory to pursue enemies.

Other times they summoned flames, enhancing the explosion of cannonballs. Occasionally, they purely summoned heavenly lightning to strike down enemies.

"I am proficient in thirty-six types of formations, twenty of which are offensive techniques. Killing you, a mere ant, is just a flick of my finger," Yang Qianhuan sneered. "But if you take back what you said earlier..."

"What did I say?"

The Warlock of Dreams, who had summoned battle spirits several times, looked dishevelled. Despite his unparalleled combat power, he could not touch Yang Qianhuan, who had mastered teleportation formations.

"You said earlier that I'm not qualified to save someone from your hands. Man, you have successfully ignited my anger."

"What if I take it back? What if I don't?"

"If you take it back, I'll leave your body intact. If you don't, I'll turn you to ashes. You warlocks aren't good at killing, the battlefield where corpses pile up is the domain of warlocks. As for here, I'm in charge."

"If I want to leave, you can't stop me."

The Warlock of Dreams struck a cannonball from afar, causing it to explode. He was pushed back by the intense blast wave, blood seeping from the corners of his mouth.

"Now Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong are dead. When the amassed troops in the mountains arrive, you'll have no choice but to slink back to the capital."

At this point, the Warlock of Dreams suddenly felt a pang of unease. He furrowed his brows, retreating while calculating with his fingers.

For a diviner, such unease signified an omen.

"How is this possible..." The Warlock of Dreams exclaimed in shock.

He had sensed danger, a danger originating from Jiang Lyuzhong. However, Jiang Lyuzhong was supposed to be dead with no signs of life.

Before taking action, he had divined an omen which indicated that everything would go smoothly today. But now, everything had changed.

The omen now showed a sign of great misfortune.

Who had obscured heavenly secrets?

Boom Boom Boom...

At the edge of the horizon, a figure came running wildly. One moment he was in the distant sky, the next he was close at hand.

It was Jiang Lyuzhong, his face twisted, his eyes blood-red.

The violent aura surged like tidal waves, announcing the boundless fury of its owner.

...

Post Station, Main Hall

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were guarding the main hall, with only one Bronze Gong left upstairs to watch the prisoner.

Their sabres were placed on the table, neither speaking, sitting in silent stillness. This atmosphere had persisted for half an hour.

Suddenly, their ears twitched simultaneously, hearing the rumbling sound of wheels stopping at the post station entrance.

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao grabbed their sabres and rushed out, seeing Inspector Zhang, the Bronze Gongs, and Li Miaozen with her high ponytail.

Their faces were etched with sorrow, silent and speechless.

"Where is Xu Qi'an? Where is Xu Qi'an?" Song Tingfeng looked around in the crowd, not seeing his colleague.

"Outside," a Bronze Gong said softly.

Song Tingfeng's heart sank. He rushed out desperately, and then he saw Xu Qi'an in the carriage outside the post station.

His face was covered with a robe, but Song Tingfeng recognised him by the unique sabre.

Song Tingfeng reached out, trembling, and pulled off the robe.

Half an hour ago, his companion had been full of life. Now, there was no expression, forever gone.

Song Tingfeng stood there, head lowered, perhaps for five or six seconds. Suddenly, he cried out, a heart-wrenching wail.

"Condolences..." a Bronze Gong approached, tears in his eyes.

"Get lost!" Zhu Guangxiao kicked him away.

Song Tingfeng was still wailing, "To hell with your condolences, my brother is gone, and you tell me condolences... Give me back my brother, give me back my brother..."

...

In the hazy world, Xu Qi'an saw the small temple again, and inside sat a handsome young monk.

"Master..." Xu Qi'an said in grief and anger, "I seem to be dead. I want to greet all the women in your family, is that convenient?"

Chapter 228. On the Day of Spring (Triple Length)

Xu Qi'an was furious; anyone in his situation would be.

If he hadn't known he couldn't win, Xu Qi'an would have already gone up to cause trouble, grabbing his collar with one hand and slapping with the other, while questioning:

"Weren't you supposed to save me, you bald bastard? You owe me a life!"

This damn monk had completely betrayed his trust. They had agreed that if Xu Qi'an gave his body, the monk would help him kill his enemies. Even though their agreement was verbal, couldn't there be some contractual spirit going on here?

At this moment, Xu Qi'an very fittingly thought of a song:

You sold my love, burdened with a debt of conscience, when I finally learned the truth, tears fell from my eyes.

"What should I do now? Can I still live? Should I reincarnate or possess a body to be reborn? Is there reincarnation in this world?"

Xu Qi'an, nervously suppressing all his emotions, asked the monk Shenshu in a calm and polite manner.

The situation had come to this point; there was no use turning hostile. He should consider how to face the future. This wasn't cowardice; it was the adult way of thinking.

Between reincarnation and possessing a body to be reborn, Xu Qi'an preferred the latter. After all, growing from 8D to 8====D would take a very long time.

A grown man's soul trapped in an infant's body would drive him mad from boredom in a few years.

While Xu Qi'an was lost in thought, Shenshu opened his eyes, his expression serene. "You seem to be blaming me?"

No, I'm not blaming you, just myself for trusting the wrong person... Xu Qi'an retorted in his heart.

"How much do you know about the martial artist system?" Shenshu smiled.

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, "Open the floodgates and fuck until dawn?"

Monk Shenshu's expression paused slightly, as if he hadn't heard, and he continued calmly, "Martial artists temper themselves to use human strength against the forces of heaven and earth. This 'self' refers not only to the body but to the unity of vitality, qi, and spirit."

You damn monk can't even follow a joke, not fun at all... Xu Qi'an nodded in realisation, "So, Master, even though you were sealed in Sangpo for five hundred years, your spirit remained intact because of this principle?"

That makes sense. If it was just about tempering the body, martial artists would have too obvious a weakness. Systems like Daoism, which specialise in the primordial spirit, could easily possess a martial artist's body.

Although martial artists didn't have the flashy abilities of other systems, they seem to be the most stable in the later stages, at least more so than Daoists.

Look at the three Daoist sects—what a mess, good at nothing and the first to fall apart.

Shenshu nodded, "But below the third rank, martial artists mainly focus on tempering their bodies and practicing qi. Only at the seventh rank, the Refining Spirit realm, do they temper their primordial spirit."

Upon hearing this, Xu Qi'an suddenly realised something was amiss. If essence, qi, and spirit were equally important, why was only the seventh rank dedicated to tempering the primordial spirit?

"Now you understand the importance of the Refining Spirit realm," Monk Shenshu explained.

"Ordinary martial artists in the Refining Spirit realm are just beginning to explore their limits, this is the lower class. Continuously breaking through limits in desperate situations is the upper class. The more solid your foundation at this stage, the deeper your background will be when you reach higher ranks."

"Master, the seventh rank Refining Spirit, lays the foundation for which rank?" Xu Qi'an's heart stirred.

"The second rank, Hedao, union of the Dao."

That's too distant for me. Who knows if I'll ever reach that height in my lifetime... Xu Qi'an thought, "The reasoning is sound, but in the end, I still died."

He felt that sacrificing his life for the uncertain second rank foundation was too much of a loss.

"To be reborn, one must first die. If you don't die, how can you be reborn?" Monk Shenshu smiled.

"So, will I reincarnate or possess a body to be reborn?" Xu Qi'an asked, pondering, "If I can choose, I'd prefer to possess a body. I don't have many requirements, well, firstly, I must be exceptionally handsome. Secondly, I must be the legitimate son of a prominent family, born with a silver spoon in my mouth. Of course, my cultivation should be at the Refining Qi realm, definitely not the Refining Vitality realm. I don't want to live through those hard days of sighing with my hand on my crotch again."

“Lastly, I'd like to have a foxy older sister in her prime, the kind who goes 'ying ying ying'.”

Monk Shenshu ignored his requests, his face bearing an ancient and unchanging serenity. "A third-rank martial artist can regenerate severed limbs and is extremely hard to kill. At the highest level, they are known as indestructible. By fortune, I have reached such a level."

Xu Qi'an's heart stirred, and he heard Shenshu say, "Before you died, I preserved your last bit of vitality. By using your body to nurture my broken self, I can also give back to you. I will grant you a drop of my essence blood. Once you refine it, you will come back to life."

So this last bit of vitality is me now... That's why I'm here? Xu Qi'an asked, "Thank you, Master. When will I wake up?"

"This is a long process," Monk Shenshu replied.

Luckily, this world doesn't practice cremation, otherwise, I'd be done for... No wonder Master Shenshu didn't save me earlier. So 'reborn from death' means this... You should have said so earlier. I could have shouted a few more slogans and acted more awake... Confirming that he could be revived, Xu Qi'an's mood brightened, and he began joking cheerfully to himself.

...

Outside the City!

A crude martial artist charged head-on, causing the Warlock of Dreams to momentarily lose his breath, as if facing an avalanche or a tsunami.

At this moment, confusion and regret were useless emotions; killing the enemy was his only way out.

The Warlock of Dreams formed seals with his hands and chanted, his body bursting with blinding blood light, his aura rising.

The Blood Spirit technique, burning his essence blood to temporarily boost his combat power.

Jiang Lyuzhong's unparalleled fist intent arrived.

The Warlock of Dreams countered with his fist.

Their fists collided silently at first, but seconds later, the thunderous boom was like a thunderbolt exploding.

The ground beneath them sank simultaneously, dust rising instantly, enveloping hundreds of meters.

Yang Qianhuan, unable to dodge in time, hastily stomped the ground, activating formation patterns that formed barriers but shattered the next moment.

The posturing master felt as if someone had struck him hard on the back of the head and slammed him into a carriage. The pain nearly made him cry out, but he held it in because it didn't suit his image.

Bang, bang...

After two more punches, the blood light around the Warlock of Dreams dispersed, black smoke erupted from his head, and he flew backward like a cannonball.

Jiang Lyuzhong's rage had overtaken his reason. Now, he was perfectly aligned with the martial artist's mindset, fearless against heaven and earth.

Suddenly, it felt as if a steel nail had been driven into Jiang Lyuzhong's brain, and his heart was split in two. He spat out blood, the sudden change preventing him from continuing his pursuit.

The curse of death!

Just now, the Warlock of Dreams stole a piece of his clothing to use a curse of death.

If it had been a lower-rank martial artist, they would have died on the spot.

In battles between high-ranking experts, such interference can almost determine the outcome.

Victory lies in a split second. However, the Warlock of Dreams decisively gave up this opportunity because the opponent was a martial artist.

With skin as tough as bronze and bones as hard as iron.

All major systems disliked martial artists, considering them crude and simplistic, only capable of brute force. Another reason was that martial artists were hard to kill.

They could afford to make ten or even twenty mistakes, and you can't kill them easily; you have to slowly wear them down.

But if you make a single mistake, they will bash your brains out.

They might even lift your skullcap, take a look at your brain, and then walk away disappointed.

Pah, crude martial artist.

After the curse of death took effect, the Warlock of Dreams quickly retreated, fleeing into the distance.

"Bang!" He then collided with an invisible wall.

"Yang Qianhuan!!" the Warlock of Dreams roared in anger.

"In the formations I specialise in, six of them are trapping techniques. Go ahead and break this formation; there are five more waiting for you." Yang Qianhuan appeared not far away, his back facing the Warlock of Dreams.

In this scene, just looking at his back, anyone would sigh and say: "An otherworldly expert!"

The Warlock of Dreams had no opportunity to break the formation. He wasn't a martial artist; his margin for error was too low. Jiang Lyuzhong charged in, and with the war spirit shattered in the previous three punches, the Warlock of Dreams was no longer a "martial artist."

As everyone knew, in close combat, all systems were like little brothers in front of martial artists.

"Poof!"

Jiang Lyuzhong punched the Warlock of Dreams in the face, causing his head to explode, with red and white fragments and shattered bones flying everywhere.

The headless corpse stiffened and then slowly collapsed.

"Bastard, bastard...."

A phantom appeared in the air, looking down at Jiang Lyuzhong and Yang Qianhuan, its face twisted.

That was the soul of the Warlock of Dreams. After high-ranking experts die, their souls can linger for a few days. In the field of souls, warlocks are second only to Daoist sects.

"What do we do with this guy?" Yang Qianhuan asked.

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head: "I have no way to deal with souls; I can't kill him. Nor can I trap him."

If it were a physical body, he could kill with a single punch, but souls are special, immune to physical attacks. Energy vibrations can harm souls, but the effect was limited. If the soul of the Warlock of Dreams wanted to escape now, Jiang Lyuzhong couldn't stop it.

Yang Qianhuan said proudly: "I can trap him! There's a girl in the city who is from the Heaven Sect; she can refine this spectre."

Then he said leisurely: "Picking the stars with the moon in hand, there are none like me upon this land...."

Boom!

Primordial energy surged wildly as the Warlock of Dreams self-destructed.

Jiang Lyuzhong slowly turned his head, staring at the white-robed arcanist, and said word by word: "He self-destructed."

"... Too impatient." Yang Qianhuan said gloomily.

"Isn't the real issue that you talked too much and missed the timing?"

"Farewell!"

"Yang Qianhuan...." Jiang Lyuzhong shouted, but the white-robed arcanist had already vanished, and his remaining words were unspoken.

Xu Qi'an had sacrificed himself.

...

Late at night, a sorrowful atmosphere pervaded the post station. The bright candlelight dispelled the darkness but couldn't illuminate the gloom in people's hearts.

It was the third quarter of midnight. The severely injured Bronze Gongs stayed at the post station. The Inspector General wasn't there, and neither was Yang Chuannan because he had been released.

The Inspector General personally released him.

When the disheveled but expressionless Inspector General Zhang returned, he asked Yang Chuannan if he was willing to redeem his sins through meritorious service.

Yang Chuannan immediately agreed, not because he was eager to clear his name, but because at that moment, Commander Yang saw a storm brewing in the eyes of the scholar that made his heart tremble.

Yang Chuannan then left the post station, ordered to mobilise the military forces of the garrison to enter the city, and cooperated with the Flying Swallow Army to annihilate the remaining rebels of the other three gates.

In the process of suppressing the rebel factions, Zhu Guangxiao and Song Tingfeng led the charge, slaughtering enemies left and right, but they had to return to the post station to heal after being hit by several arrows.

After taking over Baidi City, Yang Chuannan and Li Miaozen led troops to surround the Five City Army Headquarters. From the sixth-rank "Commanders" down to clerks, they were all arrested.

Then, Inspector Zhang forcibly summoned all the officials with ranks in Baidi City and ordered the white-robed arcanist to interrogate them one by one, exposing 34 members of Song Changfu's rebel clique. Including the officials and clerks of the Five City Army Headquarters, and the captured soldiers, there were 408 people in total.

There were no subsequent interrogations or imprisonments. Inspector Zhang arbitrarily executed all the rebels at the execution ground. An inspector had the authority to act expediently, but it didn't include executing officials without trial.

However, given the current emergency, any overstepping actions could be justified post-facto by the need to eliminate rebels. As long as Inspector Zhang quelled the rebellion in Yunzhou, the court would only commend him.

Heads rolled and blood flowed like a river at the execution ground.

The matter wasn't over yet. According to the Warlock of Dreams, who had his head blown off by Jiang Lyuzhong, the rebels' plan was to kill the inspector first, take Baidi City, and then cooperate with the mountain bandits to conquer Yunzhou.

Inspector Zhang had already sent messengers to various prefectures and counties, instructing the local garrisons to be on high alert for bandit attacks.

Li Miaozen and Yang Chuannan actively prepared for the city's defense, recruiting militia, transporting and repairing siege weapons, readying themselves for the enemy.

But they waited until late at night without seeing a single figure, and the scouts sent out did not return with any reports.

At the southern gate, in the walled enclosure built into the city wall.

Inspector Zhang, Jiang Lyuzhong, Yang Chuannan, and Li Miaozen sat around a table discussing matters. Jiang Lyuzhong squinted at the city defense map.

Li Miaozen appeared gloomy and silent.

Inspector Zhang glanced at the two of them and finally looked at Yang Chuannan, humbly seeking advice: "Commander, is it possible the mountain bandits called off the attack after receiving news of the failed coup?"

He was a scholar, and though he had read some military texts, his armchair strategies were worth little. The two martial artists and the Daoist disciple present were all seasoned veterans.

Yang Chuannan's face was still pale, and his chest ached faintly.

Fortunately, he was a skilled strategist. Although his cultivation had temporarily been destroyed, personal martial prowess was secondary to the ability to command troops in battle.

When they need me, they call me Commander, but when they don't, they call me a traitor... Yang Chuannan couldn't help but grumble internally, though outwardly, he remained composed and serious, saying:

"In multi-front warfare, information doesn't travel that quickly. Even if the forces attacking Baidi City received the news, the other forces wouldn't synchronise their information.

"By now, if what the Warlock of Dreams said is true, there should already be battles in various prefectures and counties. Let's wait another hour. If no rebels attack Baidi City, we will dispatch troops to support the counties."

Yang Chuannan looked at the close friend of the Flying Swallow Lady, "Miaozhen, what do you think? Miaozhen, Miaozhen..."

Li Miaozhen snapped back, seeming to come to her senses, and asked, "What?"

Yang Chuannan repeated the question, then asked with concern: "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

Li Miaozhen shook her head, but her mind was once again filled with the image of that young Bronze Gong, standing resolutely at the courtyard entrance.

It was both tragic and sorrowful.

But what truly lingered in Li Miaozhen's mind wasn't just the sheer impact of the scene, but the realisation that she had completely misjudged that man.

She had always thought he was a lecherous scoundrel, yet in the moment of crisis, it was he who stood up while the other Bronze Gongs were focusing on healing.

The shock from this stark contrast was the strongest of all.

Every time she recalled the scene of him standing with his sword, Li Miaozhen felt a pang of sadness. Perhaps even years later, the memory of this day would still be vivid and sharp.

"Where's Yang Qianhuan?" Inspector Zhang asked.

"Gone. I couldn't keep him here," Jiang Lyuzhong replied.

He felt a bit of resentment toward Yang Qianhuan. Whenever he thought of the sacrifices of his three subordinates, Jiang Lyuzhong was filled with impotent rage, hating himself and projecting some of that anger onto Yang Qianhuan.

Even though Yang Qianhuan had given a brief explanation.

The guilt and regret would stay with him for a long time, until time could wash away the pain and he could finally move on.

"Why did he come to Yunzhou?" Inspector Zhang frowned.

Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head.

Suddenly, Jiang Lyuzhong's ears twitched, and he turned to look into the pitch-black night. Li Miaozen, a second slower, also turned her head.

"They're here!" Jiang Lyuzhong said in a deep voice.

Everyone immediately rushed out of the room, climbed onto the city wall, and peered into the distance. They saw a long stretch of lights appearing in the darkness, slowly moving like a flowing river.

Horns blared and drums thundered, echoing through the quiet, cold night.

Soldiers who had been dozing off by the parapets woke up, grabbed their spears, crossbows, shields, and other weapons, and got into battle positions.

Li Miaozen stood on the wall, squinting into the distance, suddenly tensing up. She shouted, "Watch out!"

As her words fell, a silver light broke through the sky, the spearhead slicing through the air with a sharp whistle.

A fourth-rank martial artist!

And a peak fourth-rank martial artist at that!

Li Miaozen was shocked. Yunzhou had such high-level experts? Were there such powerful figures among the bandits?

What happened next stunned her even more. Jiang Lyuzhong stepped forward to meet the silver spear, reaching out leisurely to catch it. He showed none of the seriousness or caution that one should have when facing a formidable foe.

To her surprise, the seemingly fierce and unmatched spear turned out to be soft and weak, willingly falling into Jiang Lyuzhong's hand.

Li Miaozen focused her eyes. This was a heavy silver spear, its silver paint chipped and weathered by time, but its spearhead gleamed coldly, the blood on it still fresh.

Compared to the ordinary silver spear she held, this one was a true battle weapon.

Li Miaozen's primary weapon was a flying sword, and she used a spear mainly because, after joining the army, she needed a weapon that matched her status.

In the distance, with a loud crash, a figure leapt hundreds of meters, drawing a high arc in the air before landing on the walkway of the city wall.

This person wore a dark Nightwatcher uniform, with a Gold Gong bound to his chest, his expression as hard as a sculpture.

"What are you doing here?" Jiang Lyuzhong, both surprised and delighted, threw the silver spear over.

"By father's order, I've come to Yunzhou to eliminate the bandits," Yang Yan replied concisely as he caught the spear.

Inspector Zhang was taken aback, sensing something, and asked, "What did Duke Wei say to you?"

"Father said the bandits in Yunzhou would cause trouble and ordered me to come secretly," Yang Yan said. "I took control of the local garrison forces a few days ago, planning to eliminate the bandits later. But this evening, several groups of bandits attacked different places. After I led a team to wipe them out, I guessed there might be trouble in Baidi City and rushed over.

"Sixty miles from Baidi City, I encountered a force of two thousand men and just finished killing them."

Li Miaozhen glanced at the spearhead and thought, *no wonder there's still blood on it.*

Inspector Zhang felt relieved. So we were just the revealed pieces on the board, while Duke Wei had secretly made other arrangements.

Yang Yan's eyes swept over the crowd, searching for someone. He frowned, "Where's Xu Qi'an?"

Inspector Zhang's face suddenly turned grim, and the joy in Jiang Lyuzhong's eyes faded away.

Yang Yan felt a sinking feeling in his heart. His already expressionless face grew even colder.

"He..." Inspector Zhang's eyes filled with sorrow as he said, "He died in battle."

Li Miaozhen lowered her head slightly and sighed.

Crack... The stone bricks under Yang Yan's feet suddenly shattered, as uncontrolled energy spilled out, revealing his inner turmoil.

His eyes sharp as knives, his face, usually a mask of indifference, now twisted in rare fury. He squeezed out a sentence through gritted teeth, "How did he die?"

Inspector Zhang recounted the events of the day in detail to Yang Yan. When he finally spoke of how Xu Qi'an had stood firm, refusing to retreat, to protect everyone, the inspector's eyes reddened:

"He was hit by thirty-one arrows, with over sixty sword wounds... He stood to the end, saying he wouldn't retreat... A promise is worth a thousand tons of gold, a thousand tons of gold!"

Jiang Lyuzhong exhaled slowly. Seeing the inspector's grief-stricken expression, he felt a twinge of guilt and said in a deep voice:

"It was my dereliction of duty. I'm sorry..."

Without warning, Yang Yan's spear swept across, its shaft bending as it slammed into Jiang Lyuzhong's chest.

Boom!

A resounding explosion echoed through the sky and earth.

Jiang Lyuzhong crashed through the parapet, hurtling away.

Yang Yan stomped down, shattering half the city wall, and soared into the air, his roar echoing far and wide: "Jiang Lyuzhong, you useless scum, I'm going to kill you today!"

...

In the posthouse, in the main hall.

The bodies of Xu Qi'an and three Silver Gongs lay in the centre of the hall, covered with white cloths.

The arrows had been removed from Xu Qi'an's body, and his blood-stained face had been cleaned. The sleepless Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao came downstairs in silent agreement, fetched two chairs, and sat beside Xu Qi'an.

They didn't speak, just silently kept vigil.

Men's grief was silent.

During this time, Song Tingfeng said two things: "Consider this a vigil for you." "See you in the next life, brother."

Zhu Guangxiao said one thing: "In the end, it's just the two of us."

As the candles burned down, the wax dripping and solidifying, in this atmosphere of sorrow, Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao didn't say another word.

Until the sound of heavy footsteps came from outside the posthouse. A team of Nightwatchers entered, led by Yang Yan, looking battered and worn.

Behind him were several Silver Gongs who had come to Yunzhou with him, all of whom Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao recognised.

Xu Qi'an would have recognised them too, like Min Shan and Yang Feng, with whom he had once investigated the Sangpo case ... and his superior, Li Yuchun.

Li Yuchun looked like a walking corpse, taking small, slow steps toward Xu Qi'an, as if the short distance was filled with thorns, each step causing piercing pain.

Li Yuchun reached out, lifted the white cloth... and his body swayed.

"Boss!"

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao hurried to support him.

Looking down at Xu Qi'an's face, Li Yuchun said, "I heard Ningyan died in battle, but I don't know the specifics. Can you two tell me?"

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao exchanged a glance, both a bit worried about how calm the Boss was.

Song Tingfeng recounted the events to Li Yuchun, who listened quietly and then nodded slowly. "As expected of a Bronze Gong I trained. Good lad, he didn't disgrace me.

"He always did things that pleased me, like when he beheaded that little bastard surnamed Zhu. He never coveted money, which is better than both of you. You should learn from him.

"The only bad thing was that his cultivation was too scattered, and he often sneaked off to the brothels to listen to music while patrolling. People came to me to complain several times."

He babbled on about trivial matters, reminiscing about the past.

It was mostly calm, which made Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao breathe a sigh of relief. They knew the Boss valued and appreciated Xu Qi'an highly. He had dared to publicly disgrace Wei Gong over the matter of Xu Qi'an cutting down a Silver Gong.

However, when he lifted the white cloth and inspected Xu Qi'an's attire, he suddenly flew into a rage: "Which son of a bitch dressed him, which son of a bitch dressed him? The lapels aren't symmetrical, the lapels aren't symmetrical...."

He cursed loudly, looking as if he wanted to draw his sword and kill someone, seemingly thinking that this way, others would overlook the tears welling up in his eyes.

"Boss," Song Tingfeng called out.

"The lapels aren't symmetrical, the lapels aren't symmetrical." Li Yuchun held his face in his hands, his shoulders trembling, trembling...

...

Li Miaozhen returned to her residence in Baidi City and sat alone in the study for a long time, a small jade mirror placed beside her.

Several times, she wanted to pick it up and inform everyone of Number Three's death, but she held back.

Just let him retain a bit of dignity... Li Miaozhen sighed and finally picked up the jade mirror, sending a message:

【Daozhang, I need to speak with you alone.】

Awakened in the dead of night by the jade mirror's transmission, the members of the Heaven and Earth Society were very annoyed. Seeing Number Two's message made them even more annoyed.

Again?

【NINE: I've already blocked the others.】

【TWO: The matter in Yunzhou has been settled.】

【NINE: That's good news.】

【TWO: I already know that Number Three is Xu Qi'an.】

Daoist Jinlian chuckled: 【NINE: That's good news.】

【TWO: Xu Qi'an died in battle.】

【NINE: ???】

【TWO: I will find a way to retrieve the fragment of the Earth Book. Next spring, I will leave Yunzhou and go to the capital.】

【NINE: Are you sure Xu Qi'an is dead?】

【TWO: Yes.】

【NINE: That's impossible.】

【TWO: Why do you say that, Daozhang?】

【NINE: Xu Qi'an has great fortune and is not destined to die young.】

【TWO: But he is indeed dead. I personally prepared his corpse.】

Daoist Jinlian asked: 【Did his soul scatter?】

Li Miaozen frowned: 【When I arrived, he was already dead. Besides, he hadn't reached the Refining Spirit stage, so his soul wasn't strong. It could have dissipated on the spot due to the malevolent energy and blood.】

With her Heaven Sect Holy Maiden standards, would she not be able to tell if a body still had any vitality?

Daoist Jinlian was silent for a long time before replying: 【I understand. You don't need to worry about the fragment of the Earth Book. I will verify whether Xu Qi'an is dead or alive personally.】

Li Miaozen raised her eyebrows. Daoist Jinlian clearly did not trust her judgment. However, she did not argue. The message had been delivered, whether believed or not was the Daoist's matter.

However, the fragment of the Earth Book was a treasure of the Earth Sect, and Li Miaozen felt that Daoist Jinlian was too casual in his handling and not taking it seriously enough.

Ending the block, Number One immediately sent a message: 【Two, has the Yunzhou case been resolved?】

Li Miaozen replied: 【If you want to know the details, we can exchange for equivalent information.】

【ONE: Alright, no problem.】

【TWO: The person truly colluding with the Church of the Warlock God and supporting the bandits was Minister Song Changfu. After the scheme was exposed, he sealed off Baidi City and gathered rebel forces to attack Inspector Zhang. Although they failed, the Nightwatchers also suffered heavy losses.

【Our...the Xu Qi'an we've often talked about sacrificed himself.】 She ultimately did not reveal that Xu Qi'an was Number Three.

Number Three will never appear again... Li Miaozen added in her heart, feeling a bit sad.

Xu Qi'an sacrificed himself?

Among the Heaven and Earth Society members, the one who reacted most strongly was Number Six, Hengyuan, followed by Number Four, who simply regretted the loss of talent.

Hengyuan the monk was different. He once again felt the grief he experienced when his junior brother Henghui died.

【TWO: Next spring, I will go to the capital. ONE, I want to know all the information about the younger disciples of the Human Sect.】

Number One did not reply to her again.

...

Yunzhou was now a complete mess. There was a huge upheaval in the officialdom of Baidi City, and people were panicking.

As the court-appointed inspector, Inspector Zhang could not leave. He wrote a memorial detailing the Yunzhou case and sent it to the court. Then, he stayed in Yunzhou to oversee the situation, waiting for the court's instructions and the arrival of a new Minister. Only then could he return to the capital.

Jiang Lyuzhong and Yang Yan stayed in Yunzhou to eliminate the bandits and ensure Inspector Zhang's safety.

However, Xu Qi'an and the three Silver Gongs' bodies needed to be transported back to the capital. They were heroes and should not be buried in a foreign land. In the bitter cold of winter, the bodies would not decompose quickly but could not remain in Yunzhou for long.

The task of escorting the four bodies back to the capital was assigned to Silver Gong Min Shan.

Li Yuchun and the others decided to stay in Yunzhou to participate in the bandit suppression, venting their grief. At the same time, deep down, they feared facing Xu Qi'an's family.

Inspector Zhang prepared coffins for the four fallen Nightwatchers, deeply bowed, and did not rise for a long time.

When sealing the coffins, Inspector Zhang placed four letters from the capital on Xu Qi'an's chest.

...

February 2nd, the Spring Festival.

This world did not have a New Year, but it had a similar festival called the Spring Festival, celebrating the first day of Spring.

On this day, the emperor led the civil and military officials in offering sacrifices to heaven, praying for favourable weather and national peace and prosperity in the coming year. It was the most important day in the Great Feng.

Every household followed in offering sacrifices, slaughtering sheep and cattle. Even the busiest people would return home on Spring Festival to reunite with their families.

Amid the lingering winter chill, thin ice floated on the canal as the official ship slowly headed north on its return journey.

And on that day of spring, Xu Qi'an finally woke up again.

Chapter 229. Replies to Letters

So dark... Where am I... Who am I?

He thought groggily, unable to remember who he was or where he was.

Woo woo woo...

Boom boom boom...

Xu Qi'an heard the sound of horns and drums. Gradually, he heard other sounds: the overwhelming shouts of battle, the deep and chaotic sound of horse hooves, the explosions, and the sharp clash of blades.

All kinds of sounds intertwined, forming a clear picture in Xu Qi'an's mind.

A battlefield!

As soon as he thought that, the darkness before his eyes split open, light pierced through, and indeed, he saw a battlefield.

A dense mass of troops charged, like swarming ants, with high-ranked martial artists rampaging on the battlefield, just like humans trampling on an anthill.

This battlefield was not just filled with humans; there were giant beasts two stories high, serpents dozens of meters long, and fierce birds circling the sky...

Above the melee were monks chanting sutras in the air; there were mighty barbarian warriors who could move mountains; there were fearless undead armies; there were rows of artillery troops; and there were brave cavalry riding fearsome beasts...

What kind of battlefield is this? It's too exaggerated, too many people dying, Xu Qi'an thought blankly.

His gaze swept over the battlefield, over the undead army, over the artillery troops, and looked towards the high sky at the rear of the battlefield, where a group of flying beasts hovered.

A man in azure robes stood proudly on the head of a beast, hands behind his back, looking indifferently at the fierce battlefield below.

"Wei Yuan?!"

Xu Qi'an's heart trembled, suddenly remembering who he was. At that moment, the battlefield scene collapsed and returned to endless darkness.

Xu Qi'an opened his eyes and still saw darkness.

Damn, it's so stuffy... He didn't get up immediately but concentrated on sensing his surroundings. Then, he "saw" the dark cabin, the neatly arranged five coffins, the slowly moving official ship, and the rippling waves on the canal.

This was the supernatural ability he gained after reaching the Refining Spirit stage.

He didn't know how other Refining Spirit martial artists were, but Xu Qi'an's mental power could, to some extent, act as eyes.

Even if his titanium dog eyes were blinded someday, he wouldn't be afraid.

The dream I just had... no, it shouldn't be a simple dream, how could a dream be so clear? An undead army, high monks... I've never encountered these things, how could I dream of them?

Why was Wei Yuan in the dream? He looked so young... at least his temples weren't grey. Dad really was handsome when he was young, just as handsome as me...

Lying in the coffin, Xu Qi'an recalled the scenes he saw in the dream: the vast army covering the mountains and plains, the massive scale of the battle.

Multiple forces clashing.

Combining this with Wei Yuan's appearance and his deeds, Xu Qi'an immediately had a guess — the Battle of Shanhai Pass.

Among Wei Yuan's deeds, the most famous was the Battle of Shanhai... nations clashing, large-scale, perfectly fitting the historical records of the Battle of Shanhai Pass... but why would I dream of the Battle of Shanhai Pass? How did my weakling second uncle survive? He must have been playing dead in the pile of corpses... Xu Qi'an thought, pushing open the coffin lid.

Fresh air rushed in. He took a deep breath and sat up. Suddenly, a delighted voice came from the dim cabin:

"You're awake."

Xu Qi'an was startled. Only then did he notice a man in white sitting three meters to his left, with his back to him... Well, identity revealed, it's Yang Qianhuan.

This guy was the only man Xu Qi'an could recognize just by his back.

Without responding immediately, he pondered for a few seconds before saying, "Where are we?"

Yang Qianhuan's tone was quite cheerful, showing he was in a great mood. "On the road back to the capital, oh no, on the water."

"The Yunzhou case is over?" Xu Qi'an's face showed joy. "Ah, this damn case is finally over. I no longer have to stay up late and work overtime."

"I died once, I wonder if Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao were sad for me, maybe they were more sad about missing out on five free rides..."

"Ah, I never got to trick Susu into coming home as my paper wife. Li Miaozen probably wants to kill me, good thing I died first, otherwise it would have been really awkward..."

Yang Qianhuan patiently listened to his ramblings.

"By the way, why are you on the ship too?" Xu Qi'an asked.

...Yang Qianhuan thought for a moment and said, "I was sent by my master to handle matters in Yunzhou. Now that it's done, naturally I'm returning. I happened to see the Nightwatchers sending your corpses back to the capital, so I sneaked on board."

"Then, I discovered the wounds on your body were strangely healing, so I figured you weren't dead. After waiting for a few days, hey, you really came back to life."

Yang Qianhuan spoke calmly, but his psychological journey was far more tumultuous than his tone suggested. Upon hearing the news of Xu Qi'an's death, he thought, *I'm finished. When I return to the capital, teacher will shut me under the Stargazing Tower, never to see daylight again.*

He was so scared he almost ran away from his sect.

At the same time, he felt it was a pity, such an interesting guy, how could he die, how could he be so foolish, sacrificing his 20-year-old life for an old man's.

Inspector Zhang was already half a foot in the coffin, the old man.

He followed all the way, sneaked onto the official ship, opened Xu Qi'an's coffin lid, and found that things took a turn for the better. The injuries on this kid's body were miraculously healing, his heartbeat gradually recovering, showing signs of revival.

So, Yang Qianhuan happily stayed by the coffin, not even having time to poop.

Of course, these things could not be told to Xu Qi'an.

...Did he open my coffin? Otherwise, how would he know my wounds were healing... Why would he open my coffin... I feel like he has some unspeakable purpose... Xu Qi'an thought, but showed a smile on his face:

"What did Jianzheng send you to Yunzhou for?"

Just at that moment, Yang Qianhuan asked, "How did you come back to life?"

After asking, the two of them stared at each other, falling silent.

A few seconds later, feeling guilty, they both tacitly changed the topic:

"The weather is nice today."

"The wind is quite noisy today."

Xu Qi'an and Yang Qianhuan fell silent again.

It's a bit awkward... Just as Xu Qi'an was thinking of changing the topic and talking about something else, he suddenly found four letters in his arms.

Whose letters are these?

The coffin was stored at the bottom of the cabin, with only weak light penetrating through the gaps in the deck.

The deck lets light through, this ship needs proper repairs... Xu Qi'an grumbled, casually opening a letter and reading it by the faint light.

Now, his eyesight allowed him to see in the dark without any obstacles.

After reaching the Refining Spirit stage, his body's attributes had improved in all aspects.

Big Brother:

We received your letters. Mum and dad are all very happy, Lingyin is also very happy. Mum was especially pleased, she didn't expect you to write a letter for her, she was smacking the table with joy. It's good to know that Big Brother is safe. I don't need to worry any more.

The words were thin and slender, Lingyue's handwriting.

*Auntie's probably smacking the table and cursing out my late mother... but are you happy, sister...

*Lingyue's slender and graceful face appeared in Xu Qi'an's mind. Imagining her slightly lowering her gaze, with a shy and bashful expression on her face, the corner of his mouth curled up slightly, and he continued to read:

Not long after you left, Lingyin was made to enter the school. Everything was arranged for by second brother. Now, Lingyin can recite nine characters from the Three Character classic. When mum and dad found out, they were nearly moved to tears.

Lingyin can read nine characters now? Xu Qi'an was nearly moved to tears.

However it seems she was bullied. Mum bought her a jade bracelet once, that cost ten taels of silver, and it disappeared a few days ago. There were some light bruising on her wrist, someone seems to have pulled it off.

But Lingyin doesn't know better, when we asked who had done it, she didn't say, didn't even think it was an issue. Maybe in her heart except for food, there was nothing else important.

The Spring Festival is soon arriving, dad gets home late every day, or staying overnight at barracks elsewhere, not having time to manage things in the family. Mum hasn't told him yet, and went to go ask the teacher at the school herself, but the teacher said that he didn't know, and maybe that Lingyin had lost it herself. Mum was shaking with anger, but she couldn't do anything.

If big brother were here, then this wouldn't have happened right? If second brother were here, he would definitely lament the teacher out of the city.

However second brother has also been really angry recently. From what dad said, he was freezing in the winter wind for half a night, and after returning home the next day for money and food, he hasn't talked to us since. Second brother is so stingy, it's not big brother's fault that you forgot to write a letter, big brother is also very busy.

Sis, Xinnian is your direct blood brother... it seems that not only have your legs taking a wrong turn, your heart has taken a wrong turn right to me... please continue on this trajectory. Reading up to here, Xu Qi'an had to cover his mouth with his hand to stop himself from laughing out loud.

It's a shame that I couldn't see Erlang in that state, hehehe...

*Oh also, mum said after spring, she would find me a husband. I hate it, why doesn't she go marry herself? Lingyin misses you, she asks for you every day. I... I also miss you.

What are you saying, it's not as if Auntie can remarry, Auntie is a member of our Xu family, alive or dead... big brother misses you too.

Finishing the letter, Xu Qi'an folded up the paper, and put it back into the envelope with satisfaction.

He glanced at Yang Qianhuan, but this character still had his back turned, quiet like a statue.

"What are you looking at me for, where else would I be?" Yang Qianhuan said grumpily.

Xu Qi'an ignored him, and opened the second letter.

Dearest,

You and I have been twenty days apart, and the thought of you is like a crackling flame, ever getting brighter. Everything at the Jiaofangsi is good, every day I nap, then go pick plum blossoms, and walk around. I've brewed a cask of plum blossom wine, for us to share when you come home.

This was the Madam Oiran's letter.

Occasionally I would go drink a few drinks with guests, listening to their conversations, but really your servant wants to hear about you. Yet, the capital and Yunzhou are a myriad miles apart, and information does not travel easily.

Those wretched men, they boast about being scholars, but are really only fit for gorging and boozing, with not a drop of talent, hardly comparable to my dearest. Your servant has thought many times, that meeting Master Xu was heaven's greatest gift to me.

Some days ago, the maids brought a message, I heard that you have written a new poem in Qingzhou, treated as an utmost treasure by Ziyang Jushi, and carved onto stone stele to admonish all who would cause trouble. To know the person who wrote it makes your servant unbelievably happy.

Dearest Master Xu, your servant misses you every night, my nails are even trimmed down.

Miss me all you want, just don't get it all over your hands... Xu Qi'an chuckled, before carefully folding up the paper and putting it back in its envelope.

There were two more letters left. He thought back through his remaining spare tyres: Chu Caiwei, Huaiqing, Lin'an.

There were clearly three people — three tyres, but why were there only two letters.

Xu Qi'an was a little indignant, thinking who didn't write me a letter? Is it that my tyre-raising skills are too lacklustre, or that my ocean king's trident isn't accurate enough?

He picked one at random, and opened to read:

Running dog.

When's the Yunzhou case over? We don't miss you per se, but considering the Spring festival is near, many guards have gone on holiday, and we have fewer servants by our side.

Just from the first sentence, a wave of coquettish, bitchy playfulness hit him at full force.

Is her highness really lacking attendants... mn, Biaobiao has remembered to reply, not bad, not bad... Xu Qi'an continued reading:

Your five-in-a-row has made its mark in our hands, everyone is praising my inventiveness and sharp wit, even Huaiqing has admitted defeat to me on this one, on all fours at that. Privately she said to me: Lin'an, your intelligence far bests mine, Huaiqing admits your superiority.

But of course she wouldn't admit it in public. I'm just gossiping, don't take it to heart ok? Huaiqing is still a princess after all, gotta let her have some of her pride.

But we do not take advantage of our subordinates. With the spring festival coming, Father gifted me some gold, silver, and jade, as well as some silk and jewellery. When you get back, come to our stores to pick some out.

Haha, bless your heart, Lin'an, to think that I told her that to support my martial arts, uncle had to get loans and scrape by, she just up and believed it, and is still finding ways to give me silver, how innocent... keep it up, you're doing great!

Xu Qi'an smiled happily.

What's up with the chicken bouillon, didn't you invent it? Why is everyone out there saying that the Sitianjian's Chu Caiwei invented it? We were so angry that we went and raised a storm at the Sitianjian.

Those white cloaks didn't dare touch me, but they had the gall to go tell on me to Father, and I ended up getting a heavy scolding. When you come back, we can go back to the Sitianjian, make things fair and square.

Um... admittedly the chicken bouillon really was invented by Chu Caiwei, I only gave her the prompt. We've already agreed that she can use the refinement of chicken bouillon to reach the Master of Alchemy rank.

Xu Qi'an was somewhat moved, Biaobiao is really quite protective of her own.

He put Lin'an's letter back in its envelope, and taking a deep breath, opened the last letter.

Huaiqing or Caiwei, which one of you is the traitor, we'll find out now!

Bronze Gong Xu.

The situation in Yunzhou is complex, and banditry has been endemic for decades. The Qi clique and the Church of the Warlock God have conspired for many years, and they likely have a lot of power in Yunzhou.

Remember to act carefully. Even if you have the fourth rank Gold Gong Jiang with you, you are not completely safe. If you have your target, you must move with lightning speed, lest you give him time to respond.

I surmise that Duke Wei has arranged secret orders, but likely they will not cross paths with you. Perhaps Inspector Zhang knows, perhaps not. Although your skill in deduction is unparalleled, your strength is still limited, remember to not act alone.

It's Huaiqing, huh.

Complex feelings coursed through Xu Qi'an's mind. He was feeling both disappointment and pleasure, disappointed that that big eyed kawaii beauty was not up to par, that all that effort was for naught. To let her into his fish pond, and yet not so much as to respond.

Pleased that Huaiqing was most certainly up to par, she still had this Bronze Gong in her heart.

But both sides of the hand are made of flesh, and so Xu Qi'an could not weight one feeling over the other.

Huaiqing's really scary, a little too intelligent no? No, this isn't just intelligence, this is a deep analysis of the situation, an ability to predict people's intentions, she even managed to predict Duke Wei's plans... fuck, if I go out of line even a little I'll have no chance of getting away with it.

As he remembered it, Huaiqing was still half a disciple of Wei Yuan, so to have that ability was admittedly not out of the question. Xu Qi'an narrowed his eyes, and continued reading:

A few days ago, Caiwei came to have lunch at my gardens. When we were chatting, we started chatting about you. She said that recently she was struggling over how to reply to you, because she didn't like to read, and was afraid that her clumsy writing would make you laugh.

She also said: “Xu Qi’an is really thoughtful, he even sent me a red lotus petal to me from Qingzhou, saying that I’m as pretty as the lotus in the wind.”

When Caiwei was talking about this, she wore much a smile... and so I decided to tell Caiwei: We will write a letter for you, and she happily agreed.

Heh, Master Xu is very suave indeed. Sending a flower to two people, with different phrases in each, and in such a way as to perfectly please the recipient.

We admire your talent.

... Xu Qi’an stared at the paper with a stupefied expression.

“What’s up?” Yang Qianhuan asked.

“The cart’s overturned...” Freeloader Xu’s face reddened, so embarrassed that he wanted to jump into the river, and swim back to Baidi city.

Fuuuuck... I forgot that Caiwei hadn’t really started thinking about romance. And she’s on good terms with Huaiking, she could share such gossip without so much as a thought.

Huaiking already has some prejudice to me, she wouldn’t even see me when I left the capital, and now that Miss Caiwei has let the cat out... Huaiking must have already stuck a “Scumbag” label on me.” Even the tips of Xu Qi’an’s ears turned red.

Old Xu still has some sense of pride, how could I have any face to show at the capital now... oh right, I’m dead. That’s okay then.

At the same time, he also felt relieved because Huaiking couldn't see the letters from Biaobiao, Fuxiang, and Lingyue.

The latter two need no explanation, as they had no interaction with Huaiking. And Biaobiao was her sister, they were like water and fire and would never share such intimate letters.

It was even less likely that she would show off. No matter how innocent and naive Biaobiao might appear, she was still a royal princess and wouldn’t be foolish enough to show such letters around.

Luckily, I know Chu Caiwei is a blockhead and didn't flirt with her, just talked about the local delicacies along the way... Perhaps because of this, Princess Huaiking was unhappy but still wrote to remind me. After all, what I wrote to her were love (bootlicking) letters, while what I wrote to Caiwei were normal letters.

Hehe, Huaiking, you thought I was on the second level, but I was actually on the fifth.

"Who wrote the letter?"

Seeing that Xu Qi'an finally finished reading, Yang Qianhuan started talking again.

"A friend from the capital," Xu Qi'an said calmly.

"Must be your lover," Yang Qianhuan remarked.

Xu Qi'an immediately became vigilant. "Did you peek at my letters?"

Yang Qianhuan sneered, "I, Yang Qianhuan, would never stoop to such lowly deeds."

After all, he was a fourth-ranked Arcanist... Xu Qi'an nodded and said, "By the way, your junior sister Caiwei is truly a blockhead. At her age, she should have romantic feelings. I couldn't even flirt with her; when I wrote to her, she still..."

Xu Qi'an sighed deeply.

Yang Qianhuan agreed, "Junior sister Caiwei is indeed slow to mature. She treated it as regular correspondence between friends and told Princess Huaiqing. It's not that she has no feelings for you; at least you are a very important friend to her."

Xu Qi'an's gaze suddenly became sharp. "How the hell do you know she told Huaiqing?"

"..." Yang Qianhuan.

The King of Posturing didn't speak for a long time, realizing he had been tricked. He finally understood the shame Xu Qi'an had felt earlier.

Not only did you peek at my letter, but you also stuck the envelope back...

"Forget it. Considering you helped me capture Liang Youping, I won't fuss about it," Xu Qi'an warned.

"But you mustn't spread the word about the letters."

Since things had come to this point, Yang Qianhuan had already read the letters, so he couldn't turn back time. He might as well pretend to be generous.

Yang Qianhuan was puzzled. "I didn't help you catch Liang Youping."

A cold breeze blew through the deck's gaps, hitting Xu Qi'an's neck.

He shivered slowly, his hair standing on end, and even his voice carried a hint of tremor. "What did you say?"

...

In the warm winter sun, Nangong Qianrou drove a carriage to the outer palace.

After parking the carriage, he handed the reins to a Yulin Guard who came up, bent down to take out a wooden stool, opened the carriage door, and said,

"Father, we've arrived."

Wearing a luxurious azure robe and with graying temples, Wei Yuan emerged from the carriage and stepped down onto the wooden stool.

The two of them entered the palace and headed for the Imperial Study.

"Father, I heard there was an urgent message this morning?" Nangong Qianrou asked.

The intelligence levels of the Great Feng were divided into three-hundred-mile urgency, four-hundred-mile urgency, six-hundred-mile urgency, and the highest eight-hundred-mile urgency.

Among them, eight-hundred-mile urgent information was sent directly to the cabinet, which then passed it to the emperor. Before it reaches the cabinet, no one except the messenger was allowed to handle it.

Otherwise, it was considered treason.

Wei Yuan nodded solemnly. After the eight-hundred-mile urgent letter was sent to the palace, the emperor had called a small court meeting in the Imperial Study shortly after.

An eight-hundred-mile urgent letter must be a major event, but it was unclear which province it came from.

"Truly a troublesome time!" Wei Yuan sighed lightly and then asked, "How is the preparation of the rhino armor going?"

"The materials have been collected, just waiting to be taken to the Sitianjian for forging," Nangong Qianrou said sourly.

The rhino armor was a gift Wei Yuan intended for Xu Qi'an. The rhino armor was impervious to blades and fire. If the alchemists and formation masters of the Sitianjian were to forge it into a magical item, it would become an unparalleled defensive treasure, difficult even for a fifth-rank martial artist to break through easily.

Nangong Qianrou understood Wei Yuan's intentions. He wanted to cover Xu Qi'an's last weakness, to protect this sapling that had yet to fully grow.

As they neared the Imperial Study, Nangong Qianrou was stopped by the imperial guards, and Wei Yuan proceeded alone.

Wei Yuan stepped over the threshold and entered the Imperial Study.

He casually glanced at the ministers on either side and immediately frowned.

All the ministers were looking at him with an inexplicable and obscure gaze.

Emperor Yuanjing was also looking at Wei Yuan, but the old emperor was deep in thought, showing no expression.

"Your Majesty," Wei Yuan bowed and saluted, then naturally joined the ranks, standing in his place.

Chapter 230. Compensation

Wei Yuan, who had stood firmly in the officialdom for decades, could keenly sense even the slightest change in the atmosphere.

Even though Emperor Yuanjing only glanced at him when he entered and the officials had already retracted their gazes, Wei Yuan knew that this small court meeting was likely related to him.

The Spring Festival had just concluded, and in a few days, the results of the official evaluation would be out. During this period, the lists for review from various provinces had been sent to the Ministry of Personnel, awaiting Emperor Yuanjing's final approval.

The assessment results from the capital had already taken shape under the supervision of the Minister of Personnel.

The formation of this assessment list was accompanied by intense competition and struggles, which the officials in the hall and Emperor Yuanjing were well aware of. They wouldn't overturn it at this juncture.

Since it wasn't about the official evaluation, what other major matter could involve him?

Wei Yuan's mind raced, and two words appeared in his thoughts—Yunzhou!

The eight-hundred-mile urgent report came from Yunzhou... it seems Yunzhou has indeed rebelled. With Jiang Lyuzhong and Yang Yan's abilities, and Zhang Xingying's prior efforts, Yunzhou shouldn't have descended into chaos... Wei Yuan pondered.

After waiting for another quarter of an hour, the ministers eligible to attend the small court meeting arrived one after another.

Emperor Yuanjing, looking down at the ministers below, said, "This morning, there was an eight-hundred-mile urgent letter from Yunzhou. The Yunzhou case has concluded. The one colluding with the Church of the Warlock God, supporting mountain bandits, and transporting military supplies was the Provincial Governor of Yunzhou, Song Changfu."

It was as if a bomb had been dropped; the ministers exploded into an uproar, their faces pale with shock. Following this were uncontrollable discussions and angry denunciations.

However, some people were not surprised, such as the Wang Clique.

Urgent documents must first pass through the Cabinet, which then transfers them to the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice is responsible for conveying the emperor's orders and reporting the petitions and appeals from the populace as well as military and disaster information.

The Cabinet is the domain of the Prime Minister, and while they have no right to privately open urgent documents, the emperor's first act after reading them is to inform the Cabinet and then hold a meeting.

Thus, the Wang Clique had the first-hand information.

"Silence!"

The chief eunuch beside Emperor Yuanjing shouted several times to quiet the ministers.

"My lords, please listen," Emperor Yuanjing said.

The white-haired, brocade-robed senior eunuch glanced at a corner eunuch and nodded slightly.

That eunuch stepped forward, unfolded the document in his hand, and read aloud:

"Your servant Zhang Xingying reports:

"The Yunzhou case concluded on the 24th of January. The traitors, Song Changfu, Yang You, Chen Ming... thirty-four individuals in total, have all been executed."

A string of names followed, all officials of various ranks.

"Yunzhou is now under control, and the major case has been resolved. This is due to the court's proper governance and the emperor's virtuous guidance.

"Gold Gong Jiang Lyuzhong protected me throughout, working diligently...

"Gold Gong Yang Yan, risking his life, led the army to fiercely attack the rebels, playing a crucial role in suppressing the rebellion, preventing the rebels from burning, killing, and plundering Yunzhou's people...

“Silver Gongs Zhao Bin, Tang Shanhu, and Li Yun died protecting me at the hands of the Warlock of Dreams from the Church of the Warlock God. Their loyalty and heroic spirit are truly lamentable...”

“Bronze Gongs Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao made significant contributions during the investigation, helping Xu Qi’an find evidence. To protect this evidence, they even risked their lives and suffered severe injuries... In the process of quelling the rebels, they led by example, showing no fear of death, their patriotism moving to tears...”

From Gold Gongs to Bronze Gongs, Inspector Zhang praised them one by one, writing in great detail and with much care.

Wei Yuan listened silently, his expression unchanged even when hearing of the three Silver Gongs' deaths. The mighty minister who never showed his emotions remained stoic.

“Bronze Gong Xu Qi’an, during his journey south, uncovered the iron mine smuggling case. This matter has been previously reported and will not be detailed again. However, in the Yunzhou case, Xu Qi’an single-handedly deciphered numerous clues and found the evidence... It was he who detected Song Changfu’s conspiracy, reversing the case and preventing the wrongful accusation of loyal officials.

“When the plot was exposed, Song Changfu, in a desperate act, gathered rebel forces, closed the city gates, and besieged your servant in the Provincial Governor’s office. At the moment of crisis, Xu Qi’an fought the rebels alone, killing over two hundred enemies before succumbing to exhaustion.

"Your lowly servant dares to request his posthumous ennoblement.

"Your servant is still in Yunzhou, hoping to meet Your Majesty soon. Zhang Xingying bows and submits."

After reading, the eunuch rolled up the long memorial and stepped back.

Emperor Yuanjing glanced at the ministers who couldn't stop whispering and discussing, and finally fixed his gaze on Wei Yuan.

This legendary eunuch, hailed as the most powerful official in the five hundred years of Great Feng, who won the Battle of Shanhai Pass and subdued neighbouring countries, who commanded the Nightwatchers and supervised officials with a notorious reputation...

Was actually daydreaming during the court meeting.

"What do you think of Zhang Xingying’s report, my dear ministers?" Emperor Yuanjing asked, "Wei Yuan, Wei Yuan, Wei Yuan..."

He called out three times, each louder than the last.

Wei Yuan shuddered, seemingly startled. He responded with a light "Ah?"

Emperor Yuanjing's lips curled slightly. "It seems Lord Wei is not in good spirits. Zhang Xingying has quelled the Yunzhou rebellion in its infancy, and this is also your achievement. Are you not pleased, Wei Yuan?"

Wei Yuan did not answer.

The Censor-in-Chief of the Ministry of Rites jumped out to scold, "Wei Yuan, His Majesty is speaking to you."

Wei Yuan still did not answer.

"Enough!" Emperor Yuanjing was in a good mood, waving his hand to discuss the merits of the Nightwatchers based on the memorial.

When it came to Xu Qi'an, there were disagreements about granting him a posthumous title. A small number of ministers agreed, while most objected.

In truth, it wasn't inappropriate. Titles were rewards for meritorious service and a means for the court to win hearts.

Xu Qi'an's situation warranted a posthumous title, a mere honour after death.

But Xu Qi'an was Wei Yuan's confidant, and opposing Wei Yuan was second nature for the civil ministers. Additionally, Xu Qi'an had made many enemies. From the tax silver case to the Sangpo case, from the Pingyang Princess case to the Yunzhou case.

Because of him, the Minister of Revenues from the Wang Clique fell; the Liang Clique was wiped out; the Minister of Rites from the Wang Clique was brought down; the Minister of Industry from the Qi Clique was executed along with his nine generations...

The number of people who hated him was countless. Even if it was posthumous honour, they did not want to give it to him.

Among the most vehement were the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Rites, both from the Qi Clique, who passionately argued, pointing out flaws, essentially saying:

Xu Qi'an did not deserve it.

Although the Minister of Justice was from the Qi Clique, there was no evidence linking him to the Church of the Warlock God, which allowed him to remain unaffected.

Cliques were political allies, not familial relatives.

The Minister of Rites was from the Wang Clique, whose superior had been brought down by Xu Qi'an in the Sangpo case. The most hateful thing was that the new Minister of Rites was Wei Yuan's man.

The ministers' attitudes made Emperor Yuanjing hesitant. From his perspective, the death of a Bronze Gong who constantly annoyed him was hardly enough to make the emperor ecstatic, but truthfully, it felt quite satisfying.

Like getting rid of a buzzing fly.

However, Emperor Yuanjing agreed with granting a title, as Xu Qi'an had indeed made significant contributions. Bestowing a title would demonstrate his fairness in rewards and punishments.

Emperor Yuanjing was most lenient to the deceased.

But if the majority of ministers disagreed, Emperor Yuanjing would not insist.

Just as he was about to conclude the discussion and reject Zhang Xingying's suggestion, he saw Wei Yuan step forward.

The grand eunuch walked straight to the Minister of Rites and, raising his hand, gave him a great slap!

The loud slap echoed through the Imperial Study, instantly silencing the ministers' debates and drawing astonished gazes.

"Slap!"

The Minister of Justice also received a slap, stumbling and falling, his hairpin falling off, leaving him disheveled.

"Whoa..."

The astonished looks turned into an uproar, and the Imperial Study erupted.

In the history of Great Feng, there were quite a few instances of hot-tempered officials fighting in the court. But this was the Imperial Study.

The fact that the one hitting was Wei Yuan made it even more absurd and bizarre.

In the minds of the ministers, Wei Yuan, as a eunuch, holding the power over the Nightwatchers and the Metropolitan Inspection Bureau, with labels of cunning, treacherous, and scheming, et cetera.

But he was never "impulsive and reckless", else someone would have easily gotten leverage over him, and sent him packing.

What was Wei Yuan plotting? Was it intentional?

The ministers' thoughts were racing, but the supervising secretaries didn't need to think so much. Several of them from the Six Ministries rushed out, shouting:

"Your Majesty, Wei Yuan struck people in the court, showing no respect for Your Majesty or the law. Please decree his execution."

The secretaries didn't need to think much; they just seized the opportunity and pressed hard.

Immediately, many officials echoed their sentiments.

Wei Yuan paid no heed to the ministers' accusations. He bowed and said in a deep voice, "Your Majesty, the Qi Clique's matter is not yet resolved. Although the Minister of Industry has been dealt with, his associates are still hiding within the court. In the Sangpo case, the Minister of Rites colluded with the Yao tribes, and his accomplices remain.

"As the official evaluation approaches, I suggest delaying the evaluations until all these matters are thoroughly investigated and resolved."

What does he mean?

The courtiers were taken aback, looking at Wei Yuan in disbelief. His words implied he wanted to delay the official evaluations, and he planned to stir up more trouble?

Since the beginning of the year, the capital's officialdom had gone through a period of tension, cautious observation, and intense power struggles, leading to widespread exhaustion.

Even the most cunning plotters wanted the official evaluations to end soon so they could recuperate.

Wei Yuan, however, seemed intent on continuing the strife.

Is- is he mad?

Even the Prime Minister, Wang Zhenwen, couldn't help but turn his head, astonished at Wei Yuan. Azure Cloak Wei remained expressionless, as usual.

As an old adversary, Wang Zhenwen found himself unable to fathom Wei Yuan's intentions at this moment.

Was it a moment of anger?

No, Wei Yuan could never be swayed by emotion. Besides, where would the anger come from?

Emperor Yuanjing stared at Wei Yuan for a moment before realizing that the death of the bronze gong named Xu Qi'an held significant weight in Wei Yuan's heart.

He raised his hand to quiet the ministers and slowly said, "Such a complex case solved by Xu Qi'an in just a month is truly remarkable.

"The death of such talent is a loss to our court. We shall follow Zhang Xingying's proposal.

"As for Wei Yuan striking an official in court, this is a breach of law and order. He shall be fined a year's salary. As for the official evaluation, it will proceed according to the ancestral system, with no changes."

The ministers were not surprised by Emperor Yuanjing's light punishment. Though they felt disappointed, they knew that such an incident wouldn't bring down the grand eunuch.

Given Wei Yuan's importance, the emperor's tolerance for his mistakes was very high. Striking an official a few times warranted only minor punishment.

What surprised them was that Wei Yuan did not pursue the matter of the official evaluations further, ceasing all discussion about it.

This made the ministers realize that the suggestion to delay the examinations was merely an excuse for Wei Yuan to vent his anger.

While the emperor gave only a light punishment, the ministers were greatly intrigued by the reason behind Wei Yuan's loss of composure. It seemed that even the usually invulnerable Wei Yuan had something that deeply affected him.

The debate over posthumously granting Xu Qi'an a noble title then began, with many opinions voiced.

After much discussion, Xu Qi'an's title was decided: Viscount of Changle County.

Viscount!

It was a non-hereditary title.

...

The small court session ended, and the ministers dispersed. Wei Yuan walked ahead silently, his steps fast and determined, not allowing anyone to see his expression.

"Father."

Nangong Qianrou approached, intending to ask about the small court session and the urgent document from Yunzhou. However, he froze.

Wei Yuan's face was devoid of expression, yet it was easy to sense his sadness. His eyes, worn by the years, revealed deep sorrow.

Without greeting or even nodding, Wei Yuan silently walked past Nangong Qianrou, continuing forward in silence.

The hem of his azure robe swayed gently. His silhouette was lonely and desolate.

What happened... Nangong Qianrou was stunned. He glanced at the ministers following behind, suppressing his urge to ask questions and quickly caught up with Wei Yuan.

The carriage wheels rumbled on the way back to the Nightwatchers' headquarters. Nangong Qianrou held back his questions throughout the journey, finally speaking as they neared the headquarters:

"Father, what happened?"

Inside the carriage, Wei Yuan's deep, hoarse voice responded, "Xu Qi'an has died in action."

This... Nangong Qianrou's expression froze.

He turned his head, discreetly glancing inside the carriage. Despite the door blocking his view, he couldn't help but slow his movements, fearing Wei Yuan might notice.

Everyone in the Nightwatchers' headquarters knew Wei Yuan valued Xu Qi'an, but only Nangong Qianrou and Yang Yan understood the extent. Wei Yuan placed great expectations on Xu Qi'an, like a craftsman discovering a perfect piece of raw jade.

He cherished it, constantly thinking of sculpting it into a world-class gem that would amaze everyone.

Though unspoken, Nangong Qianrou knew this anticipation and importance far surpassed his own as an adopted son.

Now that Xu Qi'an had died in action, it was understandable how Wei Yuan felt... Nangong Qianrou sighed inwardly.

He thought he would secretly rejoice at this news. Xu Qi'an's presence made him jealous and uneasy, and he had often wished that man had never appeared.

If only he was still the one his father focused on the most.

Now, hearing about Xu Qi'an's death, Nangong Qianrou found no joy but rather a sense of loss and emptiness.

At that moment, the reins in his hands slipped. Nangong Qianrou was startled to realize he had unconsciously crushed them into powder.

Upon returning to the constabulary, Nangong Qianrou followed Wei Yuan up to the seventh floor of the Tower of Noble Spirit. At the entrance of the tea room, Wei Yuan stopped and said softly:

"You go out first. I want to be alone for a while."

Nangong Qianrou hesitated but then bowed and left. However, he didn't go far and waited outside the tea room.

The tea room was silent. The afternoon sunlight streamed in through the observation deck, making it spacious and bright.

Wei Yuan, as usual, reviewed the documents, as if nothing had happened. He remained the composed and imperturbable grand eunuch.

As the sun moved west, its orange-red glow coloured the clouds as if they were burning.

Wei Yuan hadn't turned a single page of the document in his hand. He sat still for five hours.

Finally, he closed the document and rubbed his temples, calling out, "Qianrou."

"Father..." Nangong Qianrou entered, his delicate face filled with concern.

"Summon all the Gold Gongs in the constabulary," Wei Yuan ordered.

Nangong Qianrou left and soon returned with six Gold Gongs.

Wei Yuan stood in the center of the tea room, silently observing the Gold Gongs.

"Duke Wei." The Gold Gongs cupped their hands.

Wei Yuan nodded slightly and slowly said, "Send orders to all undercover agents, infiltrate the northeastern countries. By early summer, I want the southwest border defense map of the Church of the Warlock God at all costs."

Gold Gong Zhang Kaitai was taken aback. "Duke Wei..."

The other Gold Gongs were equally shocked.

Wei Yuan said calmly, "After the autumn harvest, I will wage war against the Church of the Warlock God."

As expected... The Gold Gongs carefully observed Wei Yuan and finally noticed a subtle difference in the demeanor of this grand eunuch. Previously, Duke Wei had always maintained a serene demeanor that matched his status and intelligence, holding an aura of control and calm.

But today, he was different. Those eyes, usually filled with the wisdom of ages, now burned with a sharp determination and fighting spirit.

This kind of fighting spirit and resolve had only been seen during the battle at Shanhai Pass.

The Gold Gongs lowered their heads in unison and replied formally, "We will obey your command."

The Gold Gongs then left the Tower of Noble Spirit. Once outside, one of the Gold Gongs frowned and said, "The court is unlikely to start a war lightly."

Nangong Qianrou sneered, "The court may not start a war lightly, but the Church of the Warlock God and the northeastern countries will. As long as we send the confidential information through secret channels, we need not fear that the Church of the Warlock God won't take the bait.

When the borders are disturbed, His Majesty and the court officials won't be able to turn a blind eye.

With the means of my foster father, if he wants to fight the Church of the Warlock God, it depends on whether he wants to, not on whether His Majesty wants to."

Zhang Kaitai looked at Nangong Qianrou and asked with a frown, "Did something happen in court today? Duke Wei seems a bit unusual."

Nangong Qianrou nodded, "This morning, there was an urgent report delivered from Yunzhou by Zhang Xingying. As father predicted, Yunzhou has indeed rebelled."

Pausing, he scanned the Gold Gongs, and said in a lowered voice, "Xu Qi'an has died in action."

The Gold Gongs suddenly looked up at the Tower of Noble Spirit.

.....

At that moment, Xu Qi'an was still drifting on the water.

The one who took Liang Youping wasn't the King of Posturing?!

Xu Qi'an felt an indescribable horror, akin to taking a selfie in an abandoned house, developing the photo at home, and then discovering a ghostly figure with dishevelled hair in the background.

That kind of horror chilled him to the bone and made his scalp tingle.

"Are you sure you didn't take Liang Youping?" Xu Qi'an confirmed.

"When have I, Yang Qianhuan, ever lied?" the King of Posturing said indifferently.

His teacher had assigned him the task of secretly protecting Xu Qi'an. Although the King of Posturing didn't know why his teacher had given such an order, he was always a rule-abiding disciple, very reliable in his duties!

If he promised to protect Xu Qi'an, he wouldn't do anything unnecessary.

The Yunzhou case had nothing to do with him; solving it was the Inspector General's responsibility. Later, when Xu Qi'an threw himself into the trap, he had no choice but to intervene and save him, thus revealing himself.

Get lost, you just lied about not peeking at the letters... If Xu Qi'an weren't in such a mood, he would have slapped the King of Posturing's face swollen right there.

If Liang Youping wasn't taken by Yang Qianhuan, then the whole case would have to be reconsidered... Could it be that the mastermind behind the scenes wasn't Song Changfu, but someone else, like Yang Chuannan?

The Yunzhou case originally started when the undercover agent Zhou Min discovered that Yang Chuannan was embezzling military supplies and supporting bandits. Only when Xu Qi'an stumbled upon it by accident, did they uncover the collusion between the Qi Clique and the Church of the Warlock God, leading to the subsequent investigation by the Inspector General in Yunzhou.

Could the truth of this case be:

Yang Chuannan realized that his plot was exposed by the Nightwatcher's undercover agent, so he had the Warlock of Dreams kill Zhou Min to silence him, decode the ciphers, and destroy the evidence... Then he set up this ruse, with Liang Youping as the key to the reversal.

He deliberately let Liang Youping wait for me at the dog meat shop, and then used Li Miaozen to reveal Liang Youping's identity, drawing my attention... Then had someone deliver Liang Youping to the Inspector General, using this twist to make us believe the mastermind was Song Changfu, allowing himself to escape?

At that time, Liang Youping's qi was indeed blocked, preventing Sitianjian's Qi-watching technique from determining if he was lying.

Xu Qi'an thought for a while and rejected this hypothesis for three reasons:

First, there was no need to go through so much trouble. Making the case so complicated only exposed more flaws. The simpler the case, the harder it was to solve. As the saying goes, the stranger your weapon, the quicker your death. The same principle applied to cases.

Yang Chuannan only needed to destroy the evidence. Even if everyone suspected him, without evidence, Zhang Xingying couldn't touch a second-grade commander.

This was the safest method.

Second, Zhang Xingying and others, including Xu Qi'an, believed Liang Youping's words mainly because they thought the person who helped was Yang Qianhuan.

Reviewing the case, when Liang Youping was delivered to the station, Zhang Xingying and others were doubtful of his testimony. At that time, Zhang Xingying's response was to first arrest Song Changfu and confront Liang Youping.

As a result, Song Changfu "committed suicide to escape punishment," followed by the rebellion of Yunzhou's forces. The events were too closely connected, leaving no time to verify the truth of the case.

Until Yang Qianhuan appeared, everyone suddenly understood that the mysterious arcanist was Yang Qianhuan, which made sense.

So, Liang Youping's "surrender" had a reasonable explanation.

Unfortunately, after Yang Qianhuan helped Jiang Lyuzhong kill the Warlock of Dreams, he immediately left, making it impossible to verify the follow-up.

Xu Qi'an included this point as a reason because Yang Chuannan couldn't have known that Yang Qianhuan was in Yunzhou. Therefore, this mysterious arcanist was an inexplicable doubt in the minds of Zhang Xingying and others.

Although he could use the subsequent rebellion to eliminate Zhang Xingying, but if he could eliminate Zhang Xingying, why bother with such a convoluted plot?

Instead, the Warlock of Dreams' explanation made sense. The reason for hiding was to push Yang Chuannan to take the blame. When things fell apart, the last resort was to silence everyone.

Third, if Yang Chuannan was the mastermind, those rebels who followed him would have long revealed it. The traitors in Yunzhou's officialdom would certainly know who their leader was.

This was a rebellion, not some street gang affair.

The mastermind should indeed be Song Changfu, but what about that mysterious arcanist?

A wild arcanist reaching such a level? It was important to know that the arcanist system had only existed for about six hundred years, unlike warriors and other systems, which had been around for a long time and have many wild practitioners.

Moreover, even established systems like Confucianism had strict controls on cultivation methods. Only warriors, who had no dad (no beyond-rank entities), were found throughout the world. This was another reason other systems look down on warriors.

Also, why did this mysterious arcanist help me? What is his motive?

Xu Qi'an suddenly thought of something. Could the arcanist from the tax silver case, the one who created the counterfeit silver, be the same as the one in the Yunzhou case, or from the same faction?

If that's the case, helping me can be ruled out... These bastards almost got me exiled and nearly got my second uncle executed...

Xu Qi'an rubbed his temples, feeling a headache.

The Sitianjian was not so simple.

"Ah-hem..." Xu Qi'an coughed. "I need to tell you something, Brother Yang."

"Go ahead."

Xu Qi'an then detailed the existence of the mysterious arcanist to Yang Qianhuan and asked, "Is our Sitianjian hiding some secret?"

"Our Sitianjian?" Yang Qianhuan, still facing away from him, asked.

"I mean, Miss Caiwei will be married to me sooner or later eh."

"Heh." Yang Qianhuan sneered before speaking in a serious tone: "The Sitianjian indeed has some secrets. For example, our teacher never talks about our grandmaster, but I know that our teacher once killed his master."

Killed his master...

Xu Qi'an recalled the investigation into the Sangpo case and the information about the first Jianzheng.

The first Jianzheng supported the old royal line five hundred years ago. After the then Pinghai King, later Emperor Wuzong usurped the throne, the Jianzheng position was passed on to the current one.

Information about the first Jianzheng had been erased from history.

Erased completely clean, so much so that even Princess Huaqing, a scholarly genius who could be a professor of history, couldn't find any information. It was only through the Buddhist teachings from five hundred years ago that they found some clues.

So it turns out that the Jianzheng really did kill his master. What was once speculation is now confirmed...

Xu Qi'an said: "Are you suggesting that the Arcanist who appeared in Yunzhou is connected to the first Jianzheng?"

Yang Qianhuan shook his head: "I don't know about that. Don't ask too much. You don't understand the Arcanist system. Even someone as unique as me doesn't know the names of first and second-rank Arcanists."

Xu Qi'an was no longer a rookie. Typically, this meant that knowing information about first and second-rank Arcanists would reveal many secrets of the Arcanist system, secrets that couldn't be shared with outsiders.

"Do you know what rank an Arcanist needs to be to conceal someone's aura? Can you do it, Brother Yang?" Xu Qi'an probed, unwilling to give up.

"This I can tell you," Yang Qianhuan said. "Concealing one's own aura is easy for any Arcanist. Concealing someone else's aura requires a sixth rank or higher.

"But if it's as you said, that Liang Youping could conceal his aura from a fourth-rank Warlock of Dreams' divination and curses, there's only one rank in the Arcanist system that can do that. Liang Youping's aura wasn't just concealed; his fate and heavenly secrets were masked."

He paused before continuing, "A third-rank Arcanist, a Master of Heaven's Secrets."

... Third rank?! The Arcanist involved in the Yunzhou case is a third rank?! Xu Qi'an was stunned, feeling like his brain wasn't working.

The Yunzhou case involved a third-rank Arcanist!

If that were the case, then of course the fourth-rank Master of Formations Yang Qianhuan couldn't do it. Damn, if I'd known this crucial information earlier, I... I would have pretended to know nothing.

Xu Qi'an thought to himself that even if he saw through the plans of a third-rank Arcanist, he couldn't reveal them.

This wasn't cowardice; it was the mindset of an adult.

They needed to give each other some face.

"Keep this confidential and don't spread it around, especially about our teacher killing his master." Yang Qianhuan paused before adding:

"I'm not afraid of our teacher. I just think that at his age, he deserves to keep his dignity. I want to leave him some respect."

The more you explain, the guiltier you look... I wouldn't dare say anything. The Jianzheng could crush me with one finger... Xu Qi'an nodded, agreeing: "I also think we should give the Jianzheng some respect."

Yang Qianhuan smiled and said, "You are indeed an interesting man, just like me."

The Sitianjian's history wasn't long, and much about it could actually be easily investigated, unlike the Confucian and Daoist sages, the former of which lived several thousand years ago, and the latter beyond written history.

Xu Qi'an planned to secretly investigate the Sitianjian when he returned to the capital, and also look into Susu's family history — definitely not because he lusted after her body. She didn't have a body, after all.

“Gurgle gurgle...”

Xu Qi'an's stomach growled. He immediately got out of the coffin and said, “I'm going to find something to eat.”

Yang Qianhuan asked, “How do you plan to explain your resurrection?”

Xu Qi'an suddenly froze. Yes, how was he going to explain his resurrection?

The old dogs in the capital weren't easy to fool, and he was no longer the little Constable from Chang'an County. Oh, he still was a Constable this year.

He was the little Constable back then.

Xu Qi'an quietly lay back in the coffin: “I won't show up for now. I'll ask dad's opinion when we get to the capital. Brother Yang, I'll have to trouble you with the food.”

Yang Qianhuan nodded, indicating he had no problem, then asked in surprise: “Weren't you an orphan raised by your second uncle?”

“Actually, I'm Wei Yuan's illegitimate son.”

“What?!” Yang Qianhuan was shocked.

Xu Qi'an is Wei Yuan's illegitimate son? Wei Yuan actually has an illegitimate son?

.....

The Xu Family Manor, in the Inner City.

Early the next morning, Nangong Qianrou, accompanied by two Bronze Gongs, knocked on the gate of the Xu Manor.

The side door was already open, but with his status as a Gold Gong, he naturally had to use the main entrance.

The doorman, Old Zhang, opened the main door and saw three Nightwatchers. He quickly lowered his head and said, “Sirs, what brings you here?”

Because the eldest son was a Nightwatcher, he had some understanding of the hierarchy and uniforms of the Nightwatchers.

This female Nightwatcher had a gold gong embroidered on her chest, indicating a status much higher than Xu Qi'an.

At this moment, just after dawn, Nangong Qianrou glanced at Old Zhang and looked towards the interior of the residence, saying, “Is Baihu Xu Pingzhi of the Imperial Guard present?”

He was here under his adoptive father's orders to deliver a condolence payment to Xu Qi'an's family, three hundred taels of silver.

That's the set amount for a Bronze Gong. Rules were rules.

But Nangong Qianrou knew that the benefits Xu Qi'an's family would receive in the future would be immeasurable. For example, Xu Pingzhi's position in the Imperial Guard could be promoted.

The scholar from the Yunlu Academy, who would be taking the spring examination, wouldn't be sent to a remote county in the future.

“Yes, he is. The master and mistress are having breakfast in the back hall. Please wait in the front hall, sirs, while I inform the master.”

Old Zhang respectfully led the three Nightwatchers to the front hall and instructed the servants to serve hot tea.

The two Bronze Gongs politely thanked him and were very friendly.

Nangong Qianrou did not take the tea, saying, “No need to waste time. Lead me to him.”