

## Nightwatcher 231

Chapter 231. A Gift From the Jianzheng

It seemed urgent. They were Xu Qi'an's colleagues — did something happen to him?

Old Zhang, the doorman, bowed and nodded, "Please, follow me, sirs."

Nangong Qianrou stood up and, under Old Zhang's guidance, walked through the front hall and into the backyard. From a distance, they saw a young child, dressed in simple clothes, being led by a stunning young woman in a long dress.

The child pouted, looking unwilling, as she walked alongside the woman.

The two groups met, and the young woman stopped, staring in surprise at the three Nightwatchers.

"These gentlemen are here to see the master," Old Zhang explained.

Xu Lingyue nodded politely and averted her gaze, pulling the child aside.

Xu Lingyin, holding her sister's hand with one hand, raised the other, pointed at Nangong Qianrou, and shouted:

"A beautiful big sister, just as pretty as mummy."

\*Beautiful big sister?!\* Nangong Qianrou, who usually had an expressionless face, almost lost his composure. He looked incredulously at Xu Lingyin, his eye twitching.

\*Is this child an idiot? Are her eyes just for decoration?\*

He slightly raised his head, trying to make the child see his Adam's apple. But the foolish child didn't understand, repeatedly saying:

"Sister, you're as pretty as my mum."

She seemed to think that being as beautiful as her mother was the highest compliment.

Nangong Qianrou left with a flick of his sleeve. If it were anyone else calling him a woman, they'd be in big trouble. But as a dignified Gold Gong, he didn't stoop to argue with a child.

Xu Lingyue watched Nangong Qianrou and his companions enter the main hall.

"Sister, why did we stop?" Xu Lingyin looked up, her small face full of curiosity.

"They're our big brother's colleagues; we'll go to school later." Xu Lingyue replied softly, leading her sister back.

In the back hall, Xu Pingzhi, who had just finished eating, hurriedly stood up to greet them. He was a bit puzzled and fearful, cupping his hands in salute, "Gold Gong."

A Gold Gong visiting the Xu family was something Xu Pingzhi had never expected.

With the noble status of a Gold Gong, even though Xu Qi'an was thriving in the Nightwatcher's office, it was unlikely for someone of such high rank to visit a Bronze Gong's home.

Unless it was something urgent.

\*This Gold Gong was quite handsome, almost mistakable for a woman from afar, comparable to Erlang's effeminate looks...\* Xu Pingzhi thought.

"Pretty sister."

The little child, following Xu Lingyue back, stood at the threshold, calling out flatteringly.

\*Annoying brat, you won't be so bubbly soon...\* Nangong Qianrou frowned, his heart suddenly becoming heavy at the thought of Xu Qi'an's death.

His gaze swept past Xu Pingzhi and landed on the beautiful woman at the dining table. The child's words weren't wrong; she was indeed a beautiful woman.

"To what do we owe the honor of your visit, Gold Gong?" Xu Pingzhi asked.

Nangong Qianrou withdrew his gaze, paused for a moment, and said solemnly, "Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an fell in the line of duty in Yunzhou. I am here to deliver his condolence payment."

As he spoke, he opened his hand, and the Bronze Gong behind him silently handed over the silver.

Nangong Qianrou then handed the three hundred taels of silver to Xu Pingzhi, who did not take it. He stood frozen, like a statue, unmoving.

Even his eyes seemed fixed in place.

Xu Qi'an fell in the line of duty... Nangong Qianrou's words struck Xu Pingzhi like a thunderclap, shattering his soul and breaking his heart.

In an instant, it felt like the world lost its color, his mind filled with the tragic news, leaving him utterly despondent.

Xu Qi'an was his nephew, his elder brother's orphan, whom he had raised for twenty years. They were like father and son, or perhaps even closer.

Uncle Xu had always felt a strong sense of responsibility towards Xu Qi'an because he was the last of his brother's line, the only continuation.

Raising him, seeing him marry and have children, and continuing the family line was Xu Pingzhi's greatest wish.

Now, his nephew was gone, just like that?

In a daze, Xu Pingzhi suddenly heard a sound of someone collapsing. He turned around to see his wife fainting.

"Sister, what does 'fell in the line of duty' mean?"

Xu Lingyin didn't understand. She looked up at Xu Lingyue.

Xu Lingyue didn't answer, standing there motionless, like a lifeless paper flower, beautiful yet pale.

Old Zhang, the doorman, began to cry, "It means he's dead!"

Nangong Qianrou sighed inwardly, placed the silver on the table, and said, "In three to five days, the body will be returned to the capital. You should prepare for the funeral."

The urgent message had naturally arrived in the capital before the body.

After saying this, Nangong Qianrou turned to leave.

"You're lying!"

A roar like a little lion's came from behind. Xu Lingyin blocked the path of the three Nightwatchers, glaring fiercely at Nangong Qianrou.

A six-year-old child already understood what death meant.

Nangong Qianrou ignored her, sidestepping Xu Lingyin and continuing to walk away. But Xu Lingyin wouldn't let him go, chasing and hitting him, shouting, "You're lying, you're lying..."

A child's mind was simple: as long as you make the liar take back his words, big brother will come back. As long as you beat the liar, big brother will come back...

Nangong Qianrou had to quicken his pace, leaving the Xu residence with the two Bronze Gongs. Even from a distance, he looked back uneasily.

The child had followed them, standing alone at the gate, crying loudly, her small body trembling. Like a little beast abandoned by the world.

Nangong Qianrou suddenly felt regret. He should have waited a bit, informing them of Xu Qi'an's death after the child had gone to school.

"Take her back and have her family take good care of her," Nangong Qianrou ordered the Bronze Gong on his left.

"Yes, sir."

At the Xu residence, Xu Pingzhi, after carrying his fainted wife to the bedroom, returned to the front hall to find his daughter. He intended to comfort her, but Xu Lingyue sat silently at the table, her eyes hollow, not moving an inch.

Uncle Xu sighed deeply, called over Old Zhang, and said in a deep voice, "Send someone to the academy to inform Erlang and have him return home as soon as possible."

Old Zhang wiped his tears and nodded, retreating.

In fact, few servants in the household knew how to ride a horse. Considering the importance and urgency, it would have been more appropriate for Xu Pingzhi to go to the Cloud Deer Academy himself.

But Old Zhang knew that the master couldn't ride a horse any more.

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From the capital to Qingyun Mountain and back takes four hours on horseback, and if one's horse was not a good breed, then it may even take longer.

Xu Xinnian returned home at noon, alone, leaving the messenger behind. Galloping to the gate, Xu Xinnian abruptly pulled on the reins, causing the horse to halt and rear up. Before the horse's front hooves could land, he dismounted and rushed into the house, his face pale. He stumbled over the threshold, fell hard, and cut his forehead. Unaware, he staggered up and stumbled into the house, seeing his family in the back hall—his tearful mother and his sister with vacant, lifeless eyes. He also noticed Xu Lingyin sitting alone on the steps outside the front hall, scribbling aimlessly on the ground with a dry stick.

The adults were immersed in their grief, neglecting the child's feelings. Xu Lingyin didn't dare to ask or speak, sitting silently and alone on the steps.

Xu Pingzhi, with red-rimmed eyes, looked at him and said in a low voice, "Erlang, your brother... he's gone."

Xu Xinnian's body swayed, and he nearly blacked out.

...

Just after noon, the sky darkened, and a biting wind swept through. Soon, it began to snow heavily, the first snowfall since the Spring Festival. In no time, snow blanketed the rooftops, treetops, and paths, draping the world in a thin layer of silver.

In the Imperial Palace, in the Imperial Garden, the Crown Prince invited the Second, Fourth, and Sixth Princes and the three princesses to watch the snow in Qingji Pavilion.

A fire burned brightly, and the table was laden with fine wine and food. The Crown Prince took a sip of wine and said with a smile, "It snowed only once last year. I thought we'd have to wait until the end of the year to see snow again. I didn't expect it to come so soon after the Spring Festival."

The Third Princess laughed, "I've heard that the larger the snowfall before spring, the better the harvest in the autumn. I don't know if it's true, but this snow did come before spring, even if it was after the spring festival."

The Crown Prince nodded with a smile, then looked at the Fourth Prince and asked, "What's wrong with Huaiking lately? She stays in her quarters all day and claims she's unwell whenever we invite her out for a drink."

The Fourth Prince grunted and shook his head, "I don't know."

Huaiking hadn't been seen for a while. She used to occasionally meet with her royal siblings, but recently she had shut herself away completely. Although they were siblings, Huaiking's aloof personality made it hard for them to be close.

\*Hmph, she must be too ashamed to show her face under my brilliance...\* Lin'an thought proudly, taking another sip of wine. The widespread popularity of Five in a Row had made her famous in the capital. How could an insignificant Huaiking dare to step out under her illustrious reputation? With this thought, Lin'an happily took a few more sips, her rosy cheeks and slightly hazy eyes adding to her charm.

The princes couldn't help but steal a few more glances. Having such a beautiful sister was indeed a delightful thing. Although her intelligence could be debated, her extraordinary beauty was undeniable.

To Xu Qi'an, Lin'an fit the image of a young, beautiful girl in a club who wasn't very bright, reminiscent of a stunning girl in school who was often pursued by boys but wasn't academically strong. She was the kind of girl who would frown and scratch her head over math problems, yet her beauty attracted the admiration of boys and the envy of girls, who secretly called her a "vixen."

Huaiking, on the other hand, was the cold and intelligent type, full marks with a flick of a pen, though her aloofness made her unpopular among the girls, who would privately grumble, "What's so great about her?"

The only difference between a cold, intelligent girl and a vixen was that the former could dominate the other girls in class, while the latter could only pout in frustration.

"This snow is a good omen. Do you know about the urgent message from yesterday?" The Crown Prince changed the topic.

"Is it about Zhang Xingying suppressing the rebellion in Yunzhou?" the Fourth Prince asked.

The Crown Prince nodded, "The Minister of Industry from the Qi Clique colluded with the Church of the Warlock God to build power in Yunzhou. Their intentions were treacherous. Fortunately, Inspector Zhang is capable and uncovered the plot, eliminating the rebels."

He paused and then looked at his sister, Lin'an, "Xu Qi'an played a crucial role in this case and has been posthumously honored as the Viscount of Changle. It's well-deserved."

"Of course, Xu Qi'an is my...." Lin'an had been pleased to hear her brother praise Xu Qi'an and instinctively wanted to boast. But as she listened, she suddenly froze.

"Brother Crown Prince... what, what did you say?"

Her charming face and sweet smile froze, her peach blossom eyes widening but looking vacant as she stared blankly at the Crown Prince.

"Oh, you didn't know?" The Fourth Prince sighed, "That Bronze Gong, Xu Qi'an, died in the line of duty. It's a pity."

Crash... the wine cup shattered on the ground.

Everyone looked at Lin'an.

Lin'an seemed unaware of her loss of composure. Her delicate, pale hand clutched the Crown Prince's sleeve, trembling and sobbing, "Brother Crown Prince, please don't joke with me..."

Her eyes were filled with tears and a pitiful plea.

The Crown Prince was taken aback, his expression darkening. He brushed off Lin'an's hand and said sternly, "It's true. Father has already issued a decree. When the body is returned to the capital, he will posthumously confer the title. Lin'an, remember your status."

A princess of the Great Feng, losing composure over the death of a subordinate like this was unbecoming. The Crown Prince assumed Lin'an was simply sentimental and didn't want to think deeper into it.

Lin'an silently withdrew her hand, stood up without a word, and walked into the snowstorm.

"Lin'an, Lin'an..." The Crown Prince called after her, but she kept walking.

That red figure walked on, snowflakes landing on her hair.

The Crown Prince turned to Lin'an's maid and barked, "Why are you not holding an umbrella for the princess."

The maid, who had just picked up the umbrella, hesitated at his words, bowed, and hurriedly followed Lin'an.

In the pavilion, the other princes and princesses were still in a daze, their expressions puzzled.

Meanwhile, the maid, who had once been spanked by Xu Qi'an, held the umbrella and cautiously glanced at Lin'an's profile, not daring to speak.

\*What a pity that Bronze Gong died...\* the maid sighed inwardly.

Suddenly, she heard soft sobs and looked in surprise to see Lin'an's face covered in tears.

"Princess?!"

The maid's voice trembled as she called out, anxiously glancing around. Fortunately, the snowstorm ensured no one was around. She lowered her voice, "Why are you crying? Is it because of him?"

"I don't, I don't know...." Lin'an murmured, tears falling as she clutched her chest.

It felt empty there.

...

"It's snowing! I love snowy days. When the snow stops, I can have a snowball fight with my senior brothers and build snowmen and snow horses."

At Princess Huaiqing's residence, in a warm tea room, Chu Caiwei held a cup of tea and ate pastries while gazing at the heavy snow outside.

She had a slight dimple and enjoyed the leisurely afternoon with hot tea, delicious pastries, and a snowy view.

Princess Huaiqing, dressed in a white palace gown, was wearing summer attire that accentuated her figure, as she had long been immune to the cold.

Ignoring her friend's chatter, she held a book in her hand but was lost in thought as she gazed at the snow.

"Princess Huaiqing, what's wrong with you these days? You've been so absent-minded," Chu Caiwei said, feeling ignored and annoyed.

Princess Huaiqing, her bright eyes reflecting the white snowflakes, said softly, "Caiwei, the letter we wrote for you may never reach its destination."

Chu Caiwei, still munching on pastries, asked, "Why?"

"He... has fallen in the line of duty."

Chu Caiwei's hand trembled, and the pastry fell to the ground.

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At the Stargazing Tower, on the Bagua Platform.

Chu Caiwei, feeling dejected, climbed the steps to the top of the Stargazing Tower.

The heavy snow was falling, covering the Bagua Platform with a thin layer of snow. The Jianzheng was sitting cross-legged in front of the desk, and within a radius of three feet, no snowflakes fell.

Chu Caiwei stopped behind Jianzheng and, with a voice full of grievance, sobbed, "Teacher..."

"Ever since you were little, whenever a senior brother bullied you, you would come running here crying to tell me," Jianzheng said without turning around, smiling as he drank a cup of wine.

"No senior brother bullied me," Chu Caiwei pouted and then burst into tears, "Xu Qi'an is dead, Xu Qi'an is dead, and I'm so sad..."

Jianzheng was silent for a moment, then turned his gaze to the south, seemingly focused on something. Suddenly, he chuckled and said, "It's a good thing."

Chu Caiwei cried even harder, stomping her feet and cursing, "You old man, rotten old man, my friend is dead, and you say it's a good thing? Why don't you go die?"

"How can you talk to your teacher like that? I've lived for five hundred years and haven't lived enough yet. I want to borrow another five hundred years from heaven," Jianzheng said angrily.

"But... but what you just said doesn't seem like something a teacher should say," Chu Caiwei sobbed.

"If I say it's a good thing, then it's a good thing," Jianzheng said. "Remember the Pill of Rebirth I gave you a few years ago?"

"What Pill of Rebirth?" Chu Caiwei wiped her tears.

"The Pill of Rebirth, of which only three pills are made every sixty years. Even Emperor Yuanjing begged me for it, but I didn't give it to him," Jianzheng said, even more annoyed.

"Oh, it's in my pouch," Chu Caiwei sniffled. "I forgot about it. I don't have any use for it anyway."

Jianzheng nodded and smiled, "Remember, you gave the Pill of Rebirth to Xu Qi'an."

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I didn't; it's in my pouch."

"Shut up, you gave it. If anyone asks, just say that."

"Oh." Chu Caiwei continued to cry, "Teacher, Xu Qi'an is dead."

She had a habit of coming to Jianzheng to cry whenever she encountered something sad, just like a child would go to their parents to complain when they were wronged.

"You've just reached the sixth rank not long ago; don't go out for the time being," Jianzheng instructed.

After Chu Caiwei left, Jianzheng opened his palm, revealing a translucent, orange pill.

Then he pulled out a white strand of hair and gently blew on it.

The strand of hair floated in the wind, rising higher and higher, suddenly expanding and transforming into a large white bird.

The bird let out a desolate cry, circled in the air, then dived down and grabbed the Pill of Rebirth from Jianzheng's hand.

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"Do you trust Wei Yuan so much? Willing to tell him all your secrets?"

In the dimly lit cabin, Yang Qianhuan sat cross-legged, facing away from the coffin.

Xu Qi'an being Wei Yuan's illegitimate son was clearly false, as Xu Qi'an was twenty, and Wei Yuan had been a eunuch in the palace for over twenty years.

"Calling him 'Dad' was just a joke," Xu Qi'an sighed from inside the coffin. "Of course, I trust him. Duke Wei has been very kind to me, willing to cultivate me. It's no exaggeration to say he's been like a father. But I do feel a bit hesitant to tell him all my secrets."

"Why?" Yang Qianhuan asked.

"Well, Duke Wei's thoughts are too deep; you can never see through him. You never know what he's thinking or how he'll react if I tell him my secrets," Xu Qi'an explained.

"That's true. Wei Yuan and my teacher are both terrifyingly deep thinkers. Even someone like me, who can pluck the moon and stars, can't see through them," Yang Qianhuan admitted. "But, why are you willing to talk to me about your innermost thoughts?"

"Because Senior Brother Yang is a man with a child's heart," Xu Qi'an said with a smile.

\*Except for his penchant for showing off, he doesn't care about anything else.\*

Yang Qianhuan nodded but then felt something was off, "It sounds like you're not complimenting me... Have you considered leaving the capital? After all, you're officially dead now; you could go anywhere."

"But my family is in the capital. If I can return, I want to," Xu Qi'an sighed. "I've always longed for the life of a wandering swordsman, but no matter where you go, having a home to return to is reassuring. If I leave the capital, I might never come back."

After spending some time together, perhaps out of boredom, the two had gone from casual banter to discussing more serious matters.

"That's true. When I'm away, just thinking about my senior and junior brothers and my teacher at the Sitianjian makes me feel secure. It's not really being homeless, just traveling," Yang Qianhuan nodded slightly.

Xu Qi'an's mention of consulting Wei Yuan was more to appease Yang Qianhuan, as he was still weighing the pros and cons of revealing his secrets.

Wei Yuan had been kind to him, but Xu Qi'an couldn't predict whether Wei Yuan would choose to re-seal the demon monk Shenshu or turn a blind eye to his existence if the secrets were revealed.

After all, he wasn't Wei Yuan's real son.

But he was also reluctant to leave the capital, feeling caught between a rock and a hard place.

Additionally, the demon monk Shenshu had instructed him to keep his existence a secret, and Xu Qi'an couldn't predict Shenshu's reaction if the secret were revealed to Wei Yuan.

Just because a powerful figure always wore a kind face didn't mean they were a benevolent saint.

"Hey, Pos... Senior Brother Yang, are you married?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"No," Yang Qianhuan shook his head. "Women are a burden; I don't need one."

\*I see. I was wondering if you'd not allow your wife to look at you during... Well, if so, you'd have two choices: either become like the lesser saint of the Cloud Deer Academy, always standing behind your wife, or become a man of strong moral character,\* Xu Qi'an thought, chuckling to himself.

Just then, a desolate bird's call sounded from outside the boat, echoing like an owl's lament.



Yang Qianhuan was first stunned, then shocked, exclaiming, "That's my Teacher's aura."

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## Chapter 232. Moving Corpse

The Jianzheng's aura?

Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned, unable to question further as Yang Qianhuan's figure vanished before his eyes. Soon after, the desolate sound of birdsong outside ceased.

Then, the white-clad arcanist reappeared in the cabin, still with his back to Xu Qi'an, his head lowered as if examining something in his palm.

"My teacher sent me a Pill of Rebirth," Yang Qianhuan's voice carried a tone of confusion and bewilderment.

"A Pill of Rebirth?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Oh, do you know the story of breaking out of a cocoon and transforming into a butterfly?" Yang Qianhuan said.

"That's not a story; it's an overused cliché, as common as a post-rain story. Senior Brother Yang, just get to the point." Xu Qi'an waved his hand, cutting off Yang Qianhuan's attempt at showing off.

Yang Qianhuan's display was awkward and uninteresting.

"Oh... well..." Yang Qianhuan didn't mind. He was actually a straightforward and gentle person, lacking the arrogance of higher-ranked experts, though he did have a tendency to show off.

"The main ingredient of the Pill of Rebirth is the pupa of the Nine-Winged Golden Silk Butterfly, refined with a secret formula into a pill. Taking it can extend one's lifespan and rejuvenate the body.

"It's not just a myth; taking this pill induces a state of deep sleep, like a pupa forming a cocoon. All vital signs are reduced, a person enters a state like daeth, and even the soul becomes still.

"During this process, the old body is like a cocoon, nurturing a new body. Hence, the name 'Pill of Rebirth.' However, this pill is a life-saving elixir, meant to be taken only when the body is severely injured and on the brink of death."

Xu Qi'an wondered if taking such a pill would mean he was a virgin again. He exclaimed, "That's amazing!"

"Marvelous indeed, but not very practical," Yang Qianhuan shook his head. "Anyone capable of killing me wouldn't give me the chance to take the Pill of Rebirth. High-ranked martial artists fight to the death."

"What about taking it normally?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"It would only extend one's lifespan and improve overall health. It's beneficial but not worth its high cost of production. My teacher has only managed to refine one batch, three pills, in sixty years."

Xu Qi'an nodded in realization, puzzled, "Why would Jianzheng send you this..."

As he finished speaking, Xu Qi'an froze.

Yang Qianhuan also froze.

After a long silence, they spoke in unison:

"Could it be for me?"

"Is it for you?"

Another silence ensued.

\*My teacher sent me to Yunzhou to watch over Xu Qi'an, and now he's sent a Pill of Rebirth... But I don't need it, and even Sister Caiwei, a lower-ranked arcanist, wouldn't typically use it... If it's not for Xu Qi'an, then who else?\*

Just as Xu Qi'an had recently returned from the dead and was troubled about how to explain his situation, the Pill of Rebirth arrived at this time...

Yang Qianhuan's thoughts flickered.

\*This Pill of Rebirth seems tailor-made for me, perfectly resolving the current issue... But Brother Yang wouldn't need this kind of pill... But how did the Jianzheng know I needed the Pill of Rebirth?\*

\*Does he know my current situation, know I returned from the dead? Then, the Jianzheng must also know about the severed arm of Monk Shenshu inside me?\*

In that instant, Xu Qi'an's mind raced, rapidly recalling many details of the Sangpo case.

The Jiaofangsi had hidden demons, yet the Jianzheng turned a blind eye.

Shenshu's severed arm escaped from Sangpo, but the Jianzheng feigned illness and did nothing.

Henghui wreaked havoc in the capital, destroying the Earl Pingyuan's mansion. Even with an artifact to conceal his aura, could it hide from a first-ranked arcanist like the Jianzheng?

\*The remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom released Shenshu's severed arm and secretly sent it to my residence, letting it parasitize me and nurture the arm... This implies that only I can nurture Monk Shenshu in the capital... And the biggest secret about me is my peculiar luck.\*

\*In other words, the demons know about my peculiar luck, but I've hardly had any dealings with the demon clan in my life, apart from encountering a reptile and a gray fox.\*

Wait!

\*Jianzheng knew about my peculiarity, gave me the Black Gold Longsword, and secretly sent me the ultimate skill "One blade from heaven and earth"... Damn, the more I think about it, the more terrifying it gets.\*

Two speculations arose in Xu Qi'an's mind: First, the Jianzheng was colluding with the Yao. Second, the Jianzheng knew the Yao's plans but chose to do nothing for some reason.

Xu Qi'an leaned more towards the first speculation because if the Jianzheng hadn't revealed the secret within him to the Yao, how would they know about his peculiarity? He hadn't had close contact with them.

While Xu Qi'an would be grateful for Wei Yuan's gifts and accept them with ease, Jianzheng's gifts made him think of a popular saying:

All gifts from fate have long been secretly marked with a price.

Yang Qianhuan flicked his finger, sending the Pill of Rebirth into Xu Qi'an's hands. "Take it, and you can safely return to the capital. If anyone asks, say it's a pill from the Sitianjian, and you took it preemptively, knowing your life was uncertain.

"Then the pill's effects will kick in, putting you into a state of rebirth, resembling death. Inspector General Zhang and others thought you died in battle, but you were just in a deep sleep."

"This is the best solution for now. Please thank Jianzheng for me," Xu Qi'an picked up the orange-yellow, translucent Pill of Rebirth, holding it in his palm, not taking it, but instead taking out a few letters, smiling:

"This sleep might last until I reach the capital. A clever person like me won't let himself die socially."

After a pause, Xu Qi'an added, "At least not a second time."

He finished, releasing his qi, shredding the letters into fluttering pieces.

The official ship sailed through the curtain snow, breaking through thin ice, slowly heading towards the capital.

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At ten in the morning, after snowing for a day and a night, the snow finally stopped.

The Crown Prince, draped in a fox fur cloak, walked through the snowy scenery. He was tall and handsome, with a very good appearance.

Although Xu Qi'an had once mocked the sons of Emperor Yuanjing, saying none of them were any competition... His comparison wasn't with himself but with his younger brother, Xu Xinnian.

In fact, the Crown Prince was very handsome. Emperor Yuanjing had been quite handsome in his youth, and Noble Consort Chen was a stunning beauty, resulting in a beautiful daughter like Biaobiao. Naturally, the Crown Prince, her elder brother, wouldn't be lacking in looks.

Arriving at Consort Chen's residence, the Crown Prince removed his fox fur cloak and handed it to the maid who came to greet him.

Entering the room, it was as warm as spring inside, with a faint fragrance permeating the air.

Noble Consort Chen, accompanied by two maids, greeted him with a smile, "Why didn't Lin'an come?"

The Crown Prince waved his hand and sat down, drinking wine and eating dishes served by the maid.

"Hmm... This wine tastes quite good."

The Crown Prince remarked in surprise.

"It was sent by the Empress, a 'Hundred Days of Spring' wine, good for health. Drink more," Consort Chen smiled warmly and instructed the maid to pour more wine.

The mother and son chatted and dined, the atmosphere pleasant.

Because Emperor Yuanjing was obsessed with cultivating immortality and distant from women, the harem had long become a stagnant pond, filled with loneliness and boredom. The concubines, even if they wanted to engage in palace intrigue, found no reason to start.

Thus, the Crown Prince and Lin'an often visited their mother, keeping her company and relieving her loneliness.

"Is Lin'an unwell? The people I sent to invite her reported that she was hiding in her room and wouldn't see anyone," Consort Chen frowned slightly.

"She... Sigh..." The Crown Prince sighed. "Mother, do you think Lin'an is of age to marry?"

Consort Chen was taken aback and reluctantly nodded, "His Majesty is engrossed in the Dao and indifferent to your marriages. As the stepmother, the Empress rarely leaves her quarters, indifferent even to the matters of the Fourth Prince and Huaqing, let alone Lin'an."

The Crown Prince chewed his food and nodded, "I think it's time to arrange a marriage for Lin'an."

Consort Chen carefully observed the Crown Prince, frowning, "Why do you say that?"

The Crown Prince did not answer, downing his wine.

He was very sure that Lin'an had developed some feelings for that Bronze Gong. At her age, with her wilful and simple nature, she was easily swayed emotionally.

Ordinarily, no one dared to get close to her, so there hadn't been any signs. But once a man she fancied appeared, those feelings would grow and flourish.

Lin'an's recent melancholic demeanor was proof of this.

Fortunately, that Bronze Gong had already died in the line of duty, but the Crown Prince realized that Lin'an was at the age where she needed to be married.

"Drink less, drink less..." Consort Chen urged with a frown.

With worries about his sister's feelings weighing on his mind, the Crown Prince unknowingly drank too much. He felt a burning sensation in his lower abdomen.

The nearby palace maids, with their delicate features, suddenly seemed quite alluring.

"Mother, I'm heading back," the Crown Prince said, belching slightly and rising to take his leave.

The cold wind hit his face as he stepped outside, refreshing him. He felt much better as the chilly air cleared his mind.

As he made his way back with his guards, he saw a palace maid waiting by the roadside. Upon spotting the Crown Prince's group, she immediately approached and bowed, saying:

"Your Highness, Consort Fu requests your presence."

...

In Shaoyin Palace, Biaobiao opened the window, gazing out at the courtyard blanketed in pure white snow.

Her eyes were red and swollen like peaches. She had been reading a letter from the "running dog" and couldn't help but cry.

The words in the letter were a mix of sincerity and playful humor, making her imagine the "running dog's" expressions and voice.

But Lin'an knew she would never see that smile again. That person had died in Yunzhou and would return silently in a cold coffin, traveling thousands of miles back to the capital.

What saddened her even more was that, as a princess, she couldn't even attend his funeral.

The cold wind stung her face, making her shiver. When she touched her face, she realized she was crying again.

"Why cry for just a 'running dog'? It's just a 'running dog' who died..." Biaobiao angrily wiped away her tears, but the more she wiped, the more they flowed.

"Your Highness, Your Highness..."

A frantic voice came from outside. Lin'an's personal maid burst through the door, her face blue from the cold, and her thick shoes covered in dirty water and snow.

Lin'an hurriedly turned away, hastily wiping her tears, but the maid's next words left her stunned.

"The Crown Prince has been imprisoned."

A bolt from the blue, Lin'an cried out in shock, "What?!"

...

In the Imperial Study, Emperor Yuanjing sat on the dragon throne, his face dark with anger. The Chief Justice of the High Court, Wei Yuan, and the Minister of Law stood in the hall, representing the highest legal authorities of the Da Feng dynasty.

Wei Yuan was the Left Censor-in-chief of the Censorate.

"Your Majesty, this is the coroner's report. Please review it," the Minister of Law handed over the autopsy report of Consort Fu.

The chief eunuch received the report and presented it to Emperor Yuanjing, who barely glanced at it before asking expressionlessly, "Was Consort Fu violated?"

"Well..." the Minister of Law hesitated, "The coroner only conducted a preliminary examination, not wanting to disturb Consort Fu's body. Perhaps we should have the elderly nannies in the palace verify it."

Emperor Yuanjing asked in a low voice, "Where is that beast?"

"The Crown Prince is confined in his palace, awaiting your decision."

"Send him to the High Court," Emperor Yuanjing ordered, glaring at the three officials, "I want results in three days."

"Your Majesty, this matter is of great importance; three days may not be enough," the Chief Justice said.

"You have three days," Emperor Yuanjing said coldly.

"Your Majesty, Lord Wei has many capable men under him who have solved major cases. Perhaps this case should be handed over to the Censorate," suggested the Minister of Law.

The Chief Justice agreed.

"And who, pray tell, are these capable men?" Wei Yuan asked calmly, glancing at the two officials and then at Emperor Yuanjing. "The one who could handle this case died in Yunzhou."

The Minister of Law and the Chief Justice exchanged looks. The bronze gong who had solved numerous cases had indeed died in Yunzhou, which they had secretly celebrated. But now, with no one to carry the pot, they felt conflicted.

Consort Fu had died. Perhaps after being assaulted by the crown prince, in a fit of despair she threw herself from the balcony, breaking the fence, and falling to her death.

The case seemed straightforward: the Crown Prince had drunk at Consort Chen's palace and somehow ended up at Consort Fu's residence. Then, Consort Fu, in disarray, fell to her death.

This scandal not only concerned the royal family's reputation but also the legitimacy of the Crown Prince, involving complex interests. Neither the Chief Justice nor the Minister of Law wanted to handle this hot potato.

Emperor Yuanjing frowned. He knew Wei Yuan was referring to Xu Qi'an, the Bronze Gong who had died in Yunzhou. He had always found the Bronze Gong annoying.

But now, facing a major case, Emperor Yuanjing suddenly realized the Bronze Gong's importance. It was a great loss.

Bang! Emperor Yuanjing slapped the table in anger, "Is my Greath Feng so bereft of talent that we can't solve a case without a Bronze Gong?"

"Forgive us, Your Majesty."

The three officials bowed in unison.

At that moment, an eunuch hurried to the entrance of the Imperial Study, bowing low without crossing the threshold.

This indicated that there was something important outside, and since Emperor Yuanjing was seated facing the door, he could see the eunuch but would only summon him if he wished.

"What is it?" Emperor Yuanjing's voice was thick with suppressed anger.

The chief eunuch quickly called the eunuch inside.

"Reporting to Your Majesty, Princess Lin'an requests an audience," the eunuch announced.

Princess Lin'an coming at this time was obviously about the Crown Prince.

Emperor Yuanjing pinched the bridge of his nose, "Send her away. I won't see her for the next few days."

...

The eunuch relayed the order outside the Imperial Study. At the foot of the high steps, Princess Lin'an, draped in a red fox-fur cloak, waited anxiously. Her face was round and delicate, her demeanor charming and passionate.

She was accompanied by two personal maids.

"Second Princess, His Majesty will not see you. Please return," the eunuch said softly.

Lin'an bit her lip, stubbornly refusing to leave.

She waited and waited outside the Imperial Study. Soon, the heads of the three judicial branches emerged. The Minister of Law exclaimed, "Your Highness, it's freezing cold, you mustn't be stubborn. Take care of your health and avoid catching a cold."

The Chief Justice added, "The snow is melting; it's the coldest time. Your body can't withstand the cold. Why are you standing there? Quickly, take Her Highness back."

Lin'an shook her head, unwilling to leave.

Her two maids were at a loss.

Wei Yuan wrapped his robe tighter and approached Lin'an. Her nose was red from the cold, but her fair skin made it appear a soft pink, giving her a rather cute look.

The senior official spoke gently, "I have a few questions for Your Highness."

Wei Yuan was one of the few courtiers who dared to use "I" when speaking to royal family members.

Lin'an's slightly dazed eyes moved, "Please ask, Lord Wei."

"Does Your Highness and the Crown Prince often visit Noble Consort Chen?"

"My brother and I often accompany our mother," Lin'an replied, sniffing.

"Do you drink there?"

"Yes."

"Does the Crown Prince often get drunk?"

"Not often, but my brother does enjoy his drink."

"Has he had any interactions with Consort Fu? Does he often visit other parts of the harem?"

"Of course not," Lin'an said loudly, "My brother knows he is a consort's son and has always been cautious. How could he possibly do something so outrageous?"

Wei Yuan bowed, turned, and left.

The Minister of Law and the Chief Justice followed.

The cold wind howled, and Lin'an shivered, biting her lip. Her shoulders were thin, and her red cloak, contrasted against the pure white snow, made for a beautiful yet melancholic scene.

She waited there for two hours.

Her body gradually froze, her legs numb, and her lips turned blue. Lin'an's heart felt as if it had frozen too.

"What are you still doing here?" A familiar voice sounded behind her.

She stiffly turned her neck to look back. It was the annoying Huaiqing.

Huaiqing was dressed in a beautiful white palace gown, embroidered with vivid red plum blossoms. She had a slender waist and a cold, ethereal demeanor that blended perfectly with the snowy landscape.

She looked like an immortal untouched by the mortal world.

Even without a mirror, Biaobiao knew she looked like a pitiful quail shivering in the cold wind.

The difference between them was stark.

"You came to laugh at me?" Biaobiao turned her head away, holding back tears.

Huaiqing looked coldly at the two palace maids and said, "How dare you serve the Second Princess like this? Men, drag them out and beat them to death."

"Yes Your Highness!"

A guard stepped forward from behind Huaiqing.

"Stop!" Lin'an turned her head sharply, intending to intervene, but she overestimated herself; her legs were numb from the cold, and she stumbled, falling to the ground.

Lin'an, panicked, cried out, "Huaiqing, you dare kill my people?"

Huaiqing walked over, looking down at her, and said indifferently, "If I kill these negligent maids right now, Father wouldn't say a word against me. You have two choices: either continue standing here, and I'll have them killed, or go back and stop disgracing yourself."

Biaobiao stood up with the help of the palace maids. Perhaps out of a desire not to lose in front of Huaiqing, she wiped away her tears, pushed the maids aside, and stared at Huaiqing:

"I don't believe my brother the Crown Prince would do such a thing."

"What does that have to do with me?" Huaiqing said coldly.

Biaobiao was momentarily speechless, biting her lip. She staggered a few steps forward, paused, and without turning around, said unwillingly, "If he were still here, he would definitely clear my brother's name."

The figure in red stumbled away.

Watching Lin'an's retreating figure, Huaiqing Princess exhaled.

"Your Highness, the Second Princess did not appreciate your gesture; was it worth it?"

The guard captain sighed helplessly.

"Do I need her gratitude?" Huaiqing snorted coldly.

"His Majesty is truly heartless, leaving the Second Princess standing outside for so long," the guard captain commented.



Huaiqing's eyes suddenly sharpened. "Go back and receive fifty lashes."

The guard captain, realizing his mistake, felt a cold sweat break out on his back despite the winter chill. "Your servant deserves punishment."

...

When the snow melted, the official ship transporting the corpses of the deceased Nightwatchers arrived at the customs checkpoint outside the capital. After inspection, the ship entered the capital via the canal and docked at the city pier.

Three Bronze Gongs from the ship unloaded the coffins containing their colleagues' bodies, hired a few carts, and some labourers to transport them.

Silver Gong Min Shan squinted, standing at the pier, gazing at the still-bustling capital, feeling a profound sense of change and nostalgia. This round trip to Yunzhou had claimed the lives of several colleagues.

The shifting fortunes of the world and the changes of fate were beyond control.

Returning to the constabulary, they handed over the five coffins to the department responsible for handling the deceased Nightwatchers. Silver Gong Min Shan entered a side hall and poured himself a cup of hot water.

In the inner hall where the coffins were placed, several clerks opened the coffins, releasing a faint smell of decay. Although the cold weather had preserved the bodies relatively well, they had begun to decompose.

The clerks, accustomed to handling corpses, had taken antidotes to ward off evil and poison and wore cloths over their mouths and noses. As they verified the identities of the deceased, they chatted casually.

"Losing three Silver Gongs at once is quite a heavy loss."

"With Yunzhou in rebellion, this is actually a minor loss. But it's a pity about Xu Qi'an."

"Yes, though he only joined recently, he had become quite the figure in the constabulary. Everyone knew he was favored by Duke Wei, and now he's gone."

"Sigh, what do you think the Jiaofangsi courtesans will do when they hear Xu Qi'an is dead?"

"What kind of sentiment can you expect from women in the pleasure quarters?"

"But Fuxiang was Xu Qi'an's lover."

"How does everyone know about Xu Qi'an and Fuxiang?"

"Who in the capital doesn't know?"

"Eh? Xu Qi'an's body is the best preserved, with barely any odour."

"Let me see... Ah, the skin breaks with a touch. Cover him back up!"

A stick of incense later, the clerks, having washed their hands and faces, found Min Shan and said, "Silver Gong Min, the number of belongings matches the list, and the identities have been verified. You may leave now."

Min Shan nodded slightly and left.

Tower of Noble Spirit.

The sound of footsteps echoed as a black-clad clerk climbed the stairs. After whispering a few words to the colleague guarding outside, he turned and descended the stairs. The guard entered and respectfully reported, "Duke Wei, the official ship from Yunzhou has arrived. The bodies of the three Silver Gongs and two Bronze Gongs have been returned to the constabulary, verified without error."

Wei Yuan looked up, was silent for a moment, then nodded, "Deliver each to their families."

He did not mention the matter of belongings, though he knew the shattered piece of the Earth Book was with Xu Qi'an.

...

Stargazing Tower, Bagua Platform.

A figure in white appeared on the platform, accompanied by a clear and long chant: "Picking the stars with the moon in hand, there are..."

The voice suddenly faltered, unable to continue.

A few seconds later, Yang Qianhuan said weakly, "Teacher, I'm back."

"Mmm," the Jianzheng did not turn around.

The master and disciple stood back-to-back, with no embrace.

"Xu Qi'an has safely returned to the capital. This trip to Yunzhou was fraught with danger but ended without incident," Yang Qianhuan said. Seeing Jianzheng remain silent, he asked, "What's the matter with Xu Qi'an? How can he come back to life, and why do you value him so highly? And also, there's a third-rank arcanist in Yunzhou—at least third-rank. But where else in the world could such an arcanist come from besides our Sitianjian?"

Jianzheng chuckled, "You needn't concern yourself with Xu Qi'an; I will handle it."

\*Junior Sister Caiwei was right, you're just an old man, rotten to the core...\* Yang Qianhuan thought to himself.

"As for that person in Yunzhou, you don't need to worry about it. Even if I tell you, you wouldn't hear it," Jianzheng said.

Yang Qianhuan was about to leave when Jianzheng's voice, tinged with helplessness, came from behind, "Release Song Qing for me."

"What did Song Qing do this time?"

"He made a person."

"..." Yang Qianhuan clicked his tongue in amazement. "To have developed alchemy to this extent, Song Qing is indeed the first in history. However, his personality is deeply flawed—stubborn, unwilling to advance."

\*As if you're much better...\* Jianzheng's mouth twitched.

"Keep an eye on him for me, don't let him do anything stupid. In a few days, your Fifth Junior Sister will come out of seclusion. Since Second Brother is not in the capital, look after your junior brothers and sisters," Jianzheng said.

"Fifth Junior Sister is out of seclusion? Has she successfully advanced to the fourth rank, becoming a formation master like me?" Yang Qianhuan asked excitedly.

"Not yet."

"In that case, isn't Fifth Junior Sister risking her life?" Yang Qianhuan was startled.

"Her opportunity to advance has arrived," Jianzheng said, with a profound look.

...

Xu Manor.

A white mourning banner hung above the gate plaque, and the red lanterns had been replaced with white ones. After receiving the compensation, the Xu family began preparing for the funeral, though they still did not know when Xu Qi'an's body would arrive. The household had not yet donned mourning clothes.

These past few days, the atmosphere in the mansion was heavy. The master became silent and reserved, the lady wept frequently, Erlang tried to remain composed but often stared blankly, Miss Lingyue lost her vitality, and little Miss Lingyin had grown thin and gaunt.

In the first couple of days, Little Pea often woke up crying at night, calling for her big brother.

A child's world is small, consisting only of a few family members. When one is suddenly gone, the world becomes incomplete.

This morning, the Xu family finally received Xu Qi'an's body. He lay in a coffin, brought back to the mansion on a cart.

Xu Pingzhi, upon receiving the news, rushed out, but seeing the coffin, he hesitated to approach.

He walked to the coffin, placed his hand on the lid...

The Bronze Gong who had delivered the body glanced at him and said softly, "Master Xu, let's go inside first."

Xu Pingzhi snapped out of his daze and took a deep breath. "Yes," he responded hoarsely.

Upon seeing the body, the family would likely be overwhelmed. Crying and mourning at the gate would be unseemly for both the living and the dead.

The coffin was carried to the mourning hall. The atmosphere there made the Nightwatcher feel suffocated, unwilling to stay longer. He cupped his hands and said, "Master Xu, I will take my leave now."

Xu Pingzhi responded hoarsely, "I won't see you out."

In the mourning hall, Auntie, Erlang, Miss Lingyue, and her sisters silently stared at the coffin, as if waiting for something.

Xu Pingzhi knew that as the head of the family, certain things had to be done. For instance, he had to be the first to face the body of

In the mourning hall, Auntie, Erlang, and the Xu Sisters silently watched the coffin, as if waiting for something.

Xu Pingzhi knew that as the head of the family, there were certain things he had to do. For instance, being the first to face his nephew's remains and confront the overwhelming grief.

The coffin lid was slowly pushed open, revealing Xu Qi'an lying inside. His skin was shrivelled, dull, and his lips had lost their color.

He had been dead for some time.

The faint hope in their hearts shattered. Despite being mentally prepared, an overwhelming surge of grief enveloped the family.

Auntie and Xu Lingyue clung to the coffin, wailing uncontrollably. Uncle Xu staggered slightly, his lips trembling. Xu Xinnian turned his head away, refusing to look at his brother's face, his hand clenched into a fist inside his sleeve, knuckles white.

Xu Lingyin leaned forward slightly, her small body leaning towards the coffin, hands behind her back, making "waah, waah" crying sounds.

\*So noisy... Who the heck is disturbing my sleep...\* Xu Qi'an thought in frustration.

He felt like he was floating in an endless void, unattached to heaven or earth, with nothing to hold onto. The only sound was the noisy crying around him.

\*I should be home... This crying, is it Aunt's? Huh, Aunt actually cries for me? Isn't her usual saying: "Xu Ningyan, you little rascal, you're my nemesis from a past life, here to collect a debt in this life..."\* Xu Qi'an thought drowsily.

He could distinguish the cries of his aunt and his two sisters from the rest.

The crying lasted a long time, then turned into sobbing and sniffing.

Time passed, and night fell.

Xu Qi'an learned this from the conversation between Second Uncle and Xinnian.

Friends and relatives of the Xu family would come to pay their respects to Xu Qi'an tomorrow; tonight, the family would keep vigil over his body.

\*This should be the second time I've died. The first time was from alcohol poisoning... fuck, I didn't delete my 120GB wife... How embarrassing... Fortunately, this world doesn't have computers or phones. Oh, there are brothels and the Jiaofangsi here, so no use for a hard drive wife.\*

\*Tomorrow the whole village will come to my house for a meal... Huaqing and Lin'an are princesses, so they probably can't come due to their status... Caiwei will definitely come. If she doesn't, I'll divorce her when I wake up... Will Fuxiang come? Oh, she probably doesn't know about my "death" yet.\*

"Mother, you should go back to your room and rest. Second Brother and I will stay here to keep watch over Big Brother," Xu Lingyue said tearfully.

Then Auntie spoke, "Your big brother floated on the river for so long, but he's finally home; we can't leave him alone. Mum's fine; Mum will stay here."

"When your father handed him to me, he was just a baby. I had no experience taking care of children at that time. Your father was a soldier, and we had no money to hire a wet nurse. I fed him goat's milk, clumsily taking care of him day by day..."

At this point, Auntie was overcome with sadness.

Xu Qi'an suddenly realized that his aunt actually loved him, despite the later tension and unpleasantness between them.

He felt touched.

"The older he got, the more annoying he became. Of the three of you, he was the ugliest and the most troublesome. Whenever I showed you and Erlang some care, he'd get jealous, thinking I didn't like him and that he was a motherless child..."

"Stop talking," Uncle Xu said angrily.

"Why can't I say it?" Auntie screamed, "I raised him with all my heart, and now he's gone. If I'd known, I'd have raised a rat instead."

She burst into tears.

"Master, Madam," Old Zhang from the gate hurriedly ran in, standing outside the mourning hall, "A young lady is outside, saying she wants to keep vigil for Dalang."

\*Who?\*

This question flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind and the minds of Second Uncle and Auntie.

"She says her name is Fuxiang," Old Zhang said.

Uncle Xu and Xu Qi'an's faces turned dark at the same time.

\*Xu Qi'an, who avoided brothels, the gentleman Xu Erlang, and the devoted husband Xu Pingzhi...\* Xu Qi'an bitterly smiled.

Uncle Xu glanced at his wife and nodded slightly, "I'll go see her outside."

Auntie wiped her tears and asked her son, "Erlang, who is Fuxiang?"

From the name alone, she didn't seem like a girl from a respectable family.

Xu Erlang, his voice thick with emotion, said, "Fuxiang is the top courtesan of the Jiaofangsi. She supposedly greatly admires Big Brother's poetry."

Xu Lingyue, perceptive as she was, frowned. Coming so late at night to keep vigil hinted at a relationship more intimate than she had imagined.

In the front hall, Uncle Xu met Fuxiang. She was dressed in a simple white dress, with a small white flower on her head, looking very plain.

At the sight of her, Uncle Xu's anger dissipated. The woman was visibly grief-stricken, her eyes red, with genuine sorrow etched on her face.

"Miss Fuxiang, what brings you here at this hour?" Uncle Xu asked in a deep voice.

"Master Xu, I wish to keep vigil for Master Xu..." Fuxiang stood up and bowed.

"That's not appropriate," Uncle Xu refused immediately.

The Xu family, though not a scholarly family, was respectable. Fuxiang, having no official status in the family, had no right to keep vigil.

"When I entered the mansion, I dismissed the Jiaofangsi attendants. Now I can't return to the inner city, and it's unsafe outside the city. If you insist on turning me away, I'll leave," Fuxiang said softly.

... Xu Pingzhi sighed. This woman truly had deep feelings for Dalang.

Arriving at the mourning hall, at the sight of Xu Qi'an's body, Fuxiang, who had been holding herself together, broke down. She had learned of Xu Qi'an's death just today from the madam of the Jiaofangsi.

She fainted on the spot, and after waking up and crying for a long time, decided to see him one last time.

Xu Lingyue, listening to Fuxiang's wailing, suddenly understood the nature of her relationship with her brother.

Fuxiang did not stay at the Xu residence for the vigil and sensibly left. Xu Pingzhi had thought to let her stay overnight, but Fuxiang's earlier words had been a lie. The Jiaofangsi would never let a courtesan out of sight.

She had said that only to ensure she could see Xu Qi'an one last time.

.....

The next day, friends and relatives of the Xu family came to pay their respects.

Xu Qi'an's grandfather only had two sons, and the eldest had died in battle twenty years ago. Now, his son had also passed away, leaving no descendants.

The Xu family relatives lamented.

Apart from the Xu family, Xu Qi'an's former superior, County Magistrate Zhu of Changle County, and Head Constable Wang, along with other colleagues, also came.

After viewing the body, Magistrate Zhu sighed, "Ningyan died young, such a pity, such a pity."

Head Constable Wang and the others looked sorrowful, sighing.

"Did Ningyan leave any last words?" Magistrate Zhu asked.

Xu Pingzhi shook his head.

\*If possible, I'd like to experience a Nigerian coffin dance...\* Xu Qi'an joked to himself, his consciousness gradually returning, though his body was still in a death-like state.

"Miss Caiwei, what are you doing?"

Suddenly, Xu Erlang's voice, tinged with anger, rang out.

Then Chu Caiwei's voice followed, "I just wanted to confirm..."

She sounded sad.

Gold Gong Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai also came to pay their respects. Viewing the body, Old Zhang sighed, "Such a talented individual dying young, no wonder Duke Wei has been in a foul mood lately."

Zhang Kaitai was one of the few who knew Xu Qi'an's talents.

"Bad person."

Xu Lingyin shouted at Nangong Qianrou, but was quickly taken away by Lü'e.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an suddenly heard a gasp, "Your humble servant greets Princess Huaiqing."

Inside and outside the mourning hall, there was a brief silence, followed by a chorus of "Greetings, Princess."

The Xu family was stunned. What's going on? The funeral of Xu Qi'an had even attracted a princess?

At that moment, the Xu family's sense of loss and regret was more intense than ever. It turned out that Dalang had connections with a princess. If not for this tragedy, he could have risen to great heights in the future.

The Xu family might have become a prominent family in the capital, perhaps even elevating the entire clan's status.

\*My Lotus girls, gathered here... Three of them...\*

Xu Qi'an suddenly remembered a joke from his past life: A \*fu'erdai\* died unexpectedly, and at his funeral, all his girlfriends came. One had had an abortion for him; another was pregnant with his child; this one was only eighteen but had been with him for three years; another had left her husband for him...

Gradually, the funeral turned into a roasting of said \*fu'erdai\*.

Fortunately, the \*fu'erdai\* had actually died.

\*Don't talk about the letter, don't talk about the letter, else I'll have no face to live any more...\* Xu Qi'an thought anxiously.

But fate decided to have fun with him that day.

Chu Caiwei said sadly: "In Qingzhou, he even wrote me a letter, telling me about all the delicacies there. When I finished reading, I was so angry I wanted to stab him to death with my chopsticks, but I never thought... that he would actually die."

Hearing this, Xu Lingyue looked at her in surprise, sniffing slightly: "Big brother wrote me a letter too."

Huaiqing said calmly: "I also received one."

Afterwards, the three girls simultaneously fell into silence:

Xu Qi'an: ...

Huaiqing suddenly had a thought, her eyes flashing, asking: "Then did he..."

Just then, a blood-curdling cat's shriek echoed, attracting the attention of everyone in the mourning chambers.

A ginger cat with its tail raised ran through the crowd, into the chamber, and launched itself towards Xu Qi'an's coffin.

A member of the Xu family shouted: "Grab that cat! If a cat jumps over a corpse, the corpse will move!"

The expressions of the other family members turned.

Those nearest to it being Huaqing, Lin'an, and Chu Caiwei, did not believe in such superstitions, and so did not immediately react to catch it.

"Meow~"

The ginger cat flew towards Xu Qi'an's head, making a horrendous noise. A voice exploded in Xu Qi'an's consciousness: "Xu Qi'an, wake up!"

\*It's Daoist Jinlian...\* Xu Qi'an's spirit shook, as he felt his soul and body begin to come together and merge.

The next moment, his senses returned to him, and he felt in control again of his body.

\*I can move...\* Xu Qi'an thought with delight, and sat up from the coffin.

The chamber became deathly silent.

\*H- h- h- he sat up!?!\*

In everyone's eyes, this was both hair-raising and petrifying.

"H- h- holy shit! It's moving!"

Someone screamed.

### Chapter 233. Rebirth

A moment ago, the Xu clan members were still lamenting Dalang's untimely death, mourning the shattered dreams of the Xu family's rise, their hearts heavy with sorrow.

But when they saw Xu Qi'an actually sit up from the coffin, their legs moved faster than their thoughts, and with a flurry of movement, they all rushed to a distance, trembling as they watched.

"He's moving... he's come back from the dead! Xu Dalang has really come back from the dead! Quick, report it to the authorities!"

"Report to whom? Every official here outranks the County Magistrate."

The chaotic voices rose and fell, as the Xu clan members were both terrified and frightened. But because of the presence of the princess and several other high-ranking officials in the courtyard, they felt emboldened and didn't flee in panic.

Some people stepped back in fear, while others instinctively moved forward, yet hesitated, confused and unsure of what was happening—people like Xu Xinnian, Xu Lingyue, Chu Caiwei, and Huaqing.

\*So itchy...\* Xu Qi'an felt a tingling itch on his scalp, as if lice were crawling all over it.



He reached up to scratch, peeling off a large chunk of scalp along with his hair.

"Ah!!!"

The timid auntie shrieked, pushing Xu Lingyue in front of her as a shield.

Xu Lingyue was also terrified. Even though this was her most beloved elder brother, under such circumstances, with her brother suddenly rising from the coffin, she felt a chill run down her spine. Instinctively, she wanted to scream and run away.

But she didn't. Her face streamed with tears as she trembled, her voice quivering with sobs, "Big Brother, do you have any unfulfilled wishes, anything you couldn't let go of..."

Her sorrow overcame her, and she wept like a flower drenched in rain.

After a brief moment of shock and confusion, a few people in the room quickly realized what was really happening to Xu Qi'an.

These individuals were none other than refining qi level Princess Huaiqing; Chu Caiwei from the Sitianjian; the high-ranked martial artists Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai; and Xu Pingzhi.

Chu Caiwei knew qi-watching, and could distinguish between the living and the dead. Coupled with something her teacher, Jianzheng, had once said, she, though not particularly clever, now began to piece things together.

\*...Is this the effect of the Rebirth Pill? No wonder the teacher mentioned it when I gave the pill to Xu Qi'an. But how did the teacher know Xu Qi'an would come back to life... and how did Xu Qi'an even take it...\* Chu Caiwei couldn't quite figure it out.

As for Xu Pingzhi and the others, it was simply due to the keen hearing and sharp eyes of martial artists. They heard Xu Qi'an's heartbeat and saw the slight rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

Their expressions were varied but shared a commonality—they were both astonished and overjoyed.

Xu Pingzhi's eyes gradually widened, his otherwise ordinary face showing a mix of overwhelming joy and sadness. A grown man, he burst into tears before everyone present.

Zhang Kaitai, too, was both excited and delighted, his emotions written all over his face. \*Xu Ningyan had come back to life? He had really come back to life?\*

Since stepping into the Xu residence, Princess Huaiqing, who had maintained her usual cold and aloof demeanour, suddenly revealed a gentle warmth on her fair face, her eyes and brows filled with joy. Anyone familiar with her would have been greatly surprised.

Nangong Qianrou, however, looked suspicious.

\*Unfulfilled wishes...\* Xu Qi'an's heart stirred. Remembering how his aunt had cried last night, saying he was the ugliest, he replied in a sorrowful, trembling voice, "Auntie treated me badly, I want her to apologize..."

His aunt let out a wail and burst into tears.

"The sage says: do not speak of strange events, the power of spirits, or unnatural beings!"

Lacking the keen hearing of a martial artist or the Qi-viewing ability of an Arcanist, Xu Xinnian, who was only at the eighth-rank Self-cultivator level in the Confucian path, believed that his brother had indeed become a vengeful spirit. He stepped forward, chanting the scriptures.

He intended to use the rudimentary power of "laws follow commandments" to make his brother lie back down.

"Go!"

But his father suddenly smacked him down with a slap. Xu Pingzhi, overcome with both grief and joy, rushed to the coffin as if approaching a rare and priceless treasure.

"Wait."

Nangong Qianrou stopped Xu Pingzhi, squinting as he scrutinized Xu Qi'an, who was scratching his head and peeling off chunks of flesh.

"The body may have come back to life, but whether the soul is still the same person is uncertain." Nangong Qianrou sneered.

Everyone's heart tightened. Recalling the strange orange cat, they immediately sensed that something was amiss.

The orange cat had leaped over Xu Dalang's body, and then Dalang had really come back to life. It was hard not to think that the one who had revived wasn't actually Xu Dalang, but someone or something else.

Nangong Qianrou, Princess Huaiqing, and the others were all well-informed people. They had either seen or heard of cases involving soul possession.

"No, he must be Dalang." Xu Pingzhi's tone was firm.

He had no reason to doubt. He could only accept that Dalang had come back to life. Any other explanation was one he couldn't face or endure.

The knife had already cut through his heart once.

"Second Uncle, it's me. I'm not dead," Xu Qi'an said.

\*Huh... Why has his voice changed?\* Xu Pingzhi's expression shifted slightly.

This "Second Uncle" was spoken in a clear, resonant voice, more magnetic and pleasing than Xu Qi'an had ever sounded.

Xu Pingzhi's heart immediately sank. Clenching his fists, he stared at his resurrected nephew and demanded, "How can you prove that you're Xu Qi'an?"

Xu Pingzhi's questioning tone heightened the suspicions already present in the minds of everyone else.

\*Good thing I don't have a mother, or I'd have to prove she's my mother too...\* Xu Qi'an inwardly complained. After a moment of thought, he replied, "Though green oranges are sour and astringent, uncle still finds it to have marvellous use."

Xu Pingzhi's face instantly stiffened.

Xu Erlang still couldn't believe that his brother had come back to life. He glanced at his father's troubled expression, took a deep breath to steady his emotions, and asked, "Are you really Big Brother?"

At this moment, Xu Qi'an's face was a grotesque mix of fresh and decayed flesh, terrifying to behold. Yet, his gaze toward his little brother was deep and affectionate as he said,

"If heaven births not I, Xu Xinnian, then the Great Feng forever will be night that never ends."

He silently added in his mind: \_And if one morn the women home leaves, Reflecting Plum Pavilion becomes a place for three.\_

\*If heaven births not I, Xu Xinnian, then the Great Feng forever will be night that never ends...\*  
Hearing this, both Second Uncle and Auntie became even more convinced that the awakened one was indeed Xu Qi'an. These small, intimate details of life were something only someone who had lived through them could know.

Inside the mourning hall, the attention of the others immediately shifted to Xu Xinnian.

Chu Caiwei thought to herself, \_This phrase better not reach Senior Brother Yang's ears, or else my fellow disciples at the Sitianjian and I will have to endure endless brainwashing.\_

\_This arrogance rivals that of that fool Yang Qianhuan...\_ Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai frowned, feeling that this scholarly Xu family member was far too conceited, and martial artists detest such arrogance.

Princess Huaiqing remained silent, but she observed Xu Xinnian with a thoughtful gaze.

"....."

Xu Erlang's handsome face turned beet red, even his ears blushing. Having these words overheard by his family was already embarrassing, but for his brother to recite them in front of so many outsiders—this level of shame was more than Xu Erlang could bear.

He wished he could push his brother aside and lie in the coffin himself, ending it all.

\_Sigh...\_

Seeing that his son had drawn the fire and become the center of everyone's attention, Xu Pingzhi let out a sigh of relief and felt a bit pleased.

"It's really Big Brother!" Xu Lingyue cheered, rushing over without hesitation and wrapping her arms around her brother's neck, crying uncontrollably.

"Big Bwother, Big Bwother..." Xu Lingyin was overjoyed, hopping around the coffin and stretching out her arms, hoping her brother would pick her up too.

But Xu Qi'an was busy comforting his sister, holding her soft body close, and completely ignored Little Pea.

Xu Pingzhi, too, rushed forward, hugging his daughter and nephew tightly, afraid that if he let go, they would disappear again.

Xu Erlang lifted his face, refusing to let the tears fall from his eyes. In front of so many people, there was no way he would display such a sentimental gesture.

"Hmph!"

Auntie turned her sharp, snow-white chin away in disdain, but then she immediately covered her mouth and began to cry.

Nangong Qianrou silently observed the falling dead flesh—it wasn't just dead skin, but chunks of decaying flesh. He frowned and asked, "How did you come back to life?"

"I never actually died..." Xu Qi'an began to explain but was interrupted when Chu Caiwei raised her hand. The beauty with big eyes and an oval face asked sweetly, "Did you take the Rebirth Pill I gave you?"

Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned, then quickly composed himself, adopting a grateful expression. "Miss Caiwei, your kindness is beyond words. Xu Ningyan is eternally grateful and would gladly offer his life in return."

"Pah!"

Chu Caiwei blushed. In truth, she felt somewhat ashamed—being an innocent foodie, she had a strong moral compass and wasn't good at lying.

Unlike Xu Qi'an, who was a habitual liar and not very good at managing relationships, often nearly drowning in his own deceit.

Xu Qi'an looked around at the others, knowing they needed an explanation. After a moment of thought, he said, "During the rebellion of Yunzhou, the rebel army besieged the Provincial Administration, putting the Governor and others in mortal danger. Knowing that the battle could end in my death, I remembered the Rebirth Pill that Lady Caiwei gave me, so I decided to gamble with it... heh, the situation was dire, and I had no other choice.

"I suppose the Inspector General must have thought I was dead, leading to this whole misunderstanding."

\_The Rebirth Pill... so that's what happened...\_ Nangong Qianrou and the others nodded in understanding.

Princess Huaiqing glanced at Xu Pingzhi and the others, who were still confused, and explained calmly, "The Rebirth Pill is a miraculous medicine crafted by the Jianzheng of the Sitianjian. Taking this pill is like a cicada shedding its old skin and being reborn in a new body.

"Even if one suffers a mortal wound, they can emerge from their cocoon completely anew."

The pill's efficacy lies in using the old body as nourishment to cultivate the new one. Just like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly.

But there are significant drawbacks, such as its "prohibitive cost" and the stringent conditions required for its use. The pill's effects kick in an hour after consumption, and the person must die within that hour—if they don't, the pill will force them to die.

It's easy to imagine tragic scenarios where someone ends up delivering themselves to death.

If someone were decapitated or died instantly, the Rebirth Pill wouldn't be able to save them.

In short, it's a case of the pill's effect kicking in at the exact moment when one's life is hanging by a thread.

Understanding the pill's effects, Nangong Qianrou and the others could only marvel at Xu Qi'an's incredible luck.

To the Xu family, Dalang's resurrection was entirely due to the life-restoring elixir given by Miss Caiwei of the Sitianjian.

"Miss Caiwei, your great kindness is beyond words," Xu Pingzhi said, cupping his fists. "Dalang owes you his life. If you ever need him to scale mountains or tread through boiling oil, just say the word. If he refuses, I, his Second Uncle, will tie him up and send him to you."

\_I did nothing and gained a life debt. Damn, Chu Caiwei has the protagonist's luck...\_ Xu Qi'an played along, cupping his fists and expressing his deep gratitude.

"Alright, Lingyue, help your brother out of the coffin. The living shouldn't stay in a coffin; it's bad luck." Xu Pingzhi said, clearly in a good mood.

"Mhm," Xu Lingyue responded, but instead of helping her brother out immediately, she began peeling the dried chunks of flesh from his face.

After removing the skin and flesh from his face and head, Xu Qi'an felt a cool breeze on his forehead. His heart sank—damn, my beautiful hair, nurtured for twenty years, is ruined.

He then noticed Xu Lingyue staring at him in a daze.

"What's wrong with my face?" Xu Qi'an's heart tightened, and he quickly touched his own face.

Xu Lingyue's pretty face flushed with two spots of red, and she looked down without saying a word.

Xu Qi'an had no choice but to step out of the coffin himself and face Princess Huaiqing, Nangong Qianrou, and the others. He clearly saw their expressions freeze.

The Xu Qi'an before them had perfectly chiseled facial features, exuding masculine vigor, with thick eyebrows, a high nose, and piercing eyes. His lips were perfectly shaped and curved.

His features hadn't changed, but they had become more refined and flawless.

\_Is this the boy I raised?\_ Auntie's rosy lips parted in disbelief as she stared at Xu Qi'an.

Nangong Qianrou let out a dismissive "tsk."

Even Chu Caiwei, who had never experienced romantic feelings, couldn't help but glance a few more times, finding Xu Ningyan more handsome after his transformation.

Princess Huaiqing's gaze lingered on his face for a few seconds before she subtly turned her head, moving her eyes away as if trying to deceive herself.

"Big Brother looks so handsome," Xu Lingyin said happily. Although her brother hadn't hugged her, her love for him remained unchanged.

"I looked like this when I was younger too," Xu Pingzhi said, pleased.

After speaking, he noticed his family staring at him in silence. Feeling a bit awkward, he added, "More or less, more or less..."

"Dalang isn't dead?"

Among the Xu clan, an elderly man called out from a distance.

Second Uncle Xu immediately went over to share the joyous news that Xu Qi'an had come back to life and explained the reasons behind it.

The Xu clan members then realized it wasn't a case of corpse moving; Xu Qi'an hadn't died at all. Instead, it was the Sitianjian's miraculous pill that had saved him.

The commoners in the capital were quite familiar with the Sitianjian. Many of the city's pharmacies and clinics were owned by the Sitianjian, and ninth-grade Arcanists often took turns practicing their skills in these clinics, providing high-quality and affordable medical services.

After explaining everything, Second Uncle Xu led Xu Qi'an around to pay respects to the elders. The Xu clan members were overjoyed. The fact that a younger member of the clan had returned from the dead was cause for celebration. Moreover, recognizing Xu Qi'an's potential and connections, the clan naturally hoped he would climb even higher.

In an instant, the atmosphere of the funeral was filled with happiness.

After reassuring the clan members, Xu Qi'an saw off the two Gold Gongs, sent off Chu Caiwei, and bid farewell to Princess Huaqing before heading to the bathhouse.

The Xu clan members remained at the Xu residence, helping to dismantle the funeral arrangements.

...

After filling the bathtub with water, Xu Qi'an rested his hands on the edges, looking down at the reflection of his face in the water.

"How handsome, now this feels right. Though, it's not quite up to the standard of my previous life," Xu Qi'an exclaimed in satisfaction.

At this moment, his facial features were still vaguely the same, but they had become more refined and perfect, with a significant increase in his attractiveness.

Sinking into the cool water, Xu Qi'an let out a comfortable moan and then ruefully rubbed his now bald head.

Just then, an orange cat nudged open the door and, with an elegant stride and tail held high, walked into the bathhouse.

"Tsk, I've long heard of the impressive effects of the Rebirth Pill, and now that I've seen it, it truly lives up to its reputation. It's transformed an ordinary person like you into someone quite distinguished."

\*So in your heart, Daoist, I was just a plain Bronze Gong all along...\* Xu Qi'an felt a bit disheartened and replied:

"Daoist, it seems you've developed too much of a fondness for cats."

"Don't dwell on such trivial matters," Daoist Jinlian said, raising a paw to tap the floor.

The orange cat leaped onto the edge of the bath barrel, then onto a stool meant for clean clothes, where it sat and spoke in the human tongue:

“I never believed you would actually perish. When I heard about your funeral today, I came by to see. Sure enough, though your body had no signs of life, there was a faint trace of a soul's presence.”

This faint soul presence was something only a Daoist adept in cultivating the Yin Spirit could detect, not something a Martial Artist could sense.

“I just gave you a little push to help you return to your body sooner.”

“Thank you, Daoist,” Xu Qi'an said sincerely. If it weren't for the Daoist's intervention, flying in with his majestic stride and exclaiming with that startling cry, there would've been little joy even if he had come back to life.

Indeed, the blessed are always protected; the Pond Master has divine providence.

“However, Miaozen mentioned that she didn't sense any soul presence in you and that you seemed utterly dead,” Daoist Jinlian continued.

Is “utterly dead” really the right term here? Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment before saying:

“On the journey back from Yunzhou to the capital, I had no consciousness at all and only began to regain a faint awareness last night.”

He implied that the faint soul presence had only appeared recently, a sign of his revival.

Daoist Jinlian nodded, then glanced down, pressing his paw on the fragment of the Earth Book, and let out a “tsk”: “Wei Yuan didn't reclaim the Earth Book fragment.”

Wei Yuan is fishing? Xu Qi'an was startled but listened as Daoist Jinlian continued:

“However, getting you to join the Heaven and Earth Society was merely a minor move for him, a step in his broader strategy. Those who are skilled in planning think long-term. After your supposed death, he might have become somewhat disheartened and didn't want to involve himself in the Heaven and Earth Society's affairs anymore. Whether the Earth Book fragment stayed with you or was retrieved by me, it likely didn't matter to him.”

\*Daoist, you and Wei Yuan really seem to be on the same page. But openly revealing my double agent status in front of me is a bit awkward...\* Xu Qi'an forced a laugh.

“By the way, could you not tell Li Miaozen about my resurrection just yet?” Xu Qi'an asked while playing with the water.

Daoist Jinlian fixed him with a stare, his amber cat eyes gazing intently: “You should be honest, young man.”

\*Motherfucker, who hasn't boasted online before? Back in the day, when I was browsing forums, I used to pose as a high-educated talent, with my catchphrase being: 'Thanks for the invite, but I'm in the U.S., just got off the plane.'\*

Xu Qi'an forced another laugh, then, recalling the events in Yunzhou, asked, "Daoist, the Yunzhou case had signs of an Arcanist's involvement, and at least a third-grade one at that. How much do you know about the Sitianjian?"

He proceeded to inform Daoist Jinlian about the mysterious Arcanist involved in the Yunzhou case.

Daoist Jinlian quickly grasped Xu Qi'an's implication and mused, "The Sitianjian has only one third-grade Arcanist, named Sun Xuanji.

"But I don't think the Arcanist who acted in Yunzhou was him; it's likely someone else."

"Who?" Xu Qi'an asked eagerly.

Daoist Jinlian glanced at him: "Do you think I would know?"

\*... What use are you then?\* Xu Qi'an forced a smile and said, "Daoist, in my mind, you've always been a wise elder, knowledgeable in all matters under the heavens."

\*And a cunning LYB.\*

Daoist Jinlian shook his head and corrected, "It's the Arcanists who are knowledgeable about the heavens, and the scholars who are knowledgeable about the earth.

"However, the Jianzheng certainly knows the background of that Arcanist, but no one can fathom that old man's thoughts."

With that, Daoist Jinlian scrutinized Xu Qi'an and remarked, "Your vitality and qi are several times stronger, and your spirit is complete. You've made significant progress since you left the capital. The Rebirth Pill's effects are indeed extraordinary."

\*It's just too expensive...\* Daoist Jinlian thought with regret.

"Just lucky, lucky... Stepping into the Refining Spirit realm in three months, such dull talent, dull talent indeed," Xu Qi'an said modestly.

... The orange cat turned and left, leaving behind a parting comment: "Go find Wei Yuan. The resources needed for the Copper-Skin Iron-Bone realm would bankrupt you several times over, but he can provide them."

After finishing his bath and changing into dry clothes, Xu Qi'an mounted his horse and rode out of the estate, heading straight for the Nightwatchers constabulary.

Chapter 234. Your Majesty, please grant me death.

The Tower of Noble Spirit.

Upon returning to the constabulary, Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai immediately headed to the Tower of Noble Spirit. With Wei Yuan's adopted son Nangong Qianrou leading, they didn't need to be announced and could go straight up to see him.

Wei Yuan stood before a large map hanging on the wall, his hands clasped behind his back, eyes narrowed, and silent. He had maintained this posture for an hour.



The map provided a bird's-eye view of the entire northeastern region, marking the headquarters of the Church of the Warlock God and the locations of various northeastern nations. This kind of map lacked precision and was only useful for a general overview, so it wasn't considered valuable.

More accurate maps were the kinds of secret items that nations would go to war over, fighting tooth and nail to acquire or protect them.

Footsteps sounded behind him, followed by the voices of Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai:

"Father."

"Duke Wei."

Without turning around, Wei Yuan spoke in a deep voice, "Xu Qi'an's body has been floating in the canal for over ten days; it shouldn't be kept any longer... Let his family bury him soon."

If one listened carefully, there was a trace of sorrow in the low voice.

Nangong Qianrou understood perfectly well why her foster father refused to look at Xu Qi'an's corpse. As a person in power and a strategist, his heart should be hard, cold even. Only those who are ruthless and detached can be invincible.

Wei Yuan was expected to be such an invincible person, unaffected by emotions.

Both the Nightwatchers in the constabulary and the outside world hoped that Wei Yuan was such a person.

"Foster Father..." Nangong Qianrou cleared her throat and said, "Xu Qi'an is not dead."

Wei Yuan whirled around, the movement so sharp that his blue robe billowed.

At that moment, the Grand Eunuch's face was a complex mix of emotions, his eyes reflecting surprise, confusion, joy, and hope... Nangong Qianrou had never seen such a complicated expression on his foster father's face.

But it was only a fleeting moment. The Grand Eunuch quickly regained his composure, calmly walked over to the table, sat down, and asked in a somewhat stern tone:

"What happened?"

Nangong Qianrou then recounted Xu Qi'an's explanation.

Wei Yuan listened quietly, then immediately said, "Have him come see me at once."

Nangong Qianrou nodded and glanced at the large bird's-eye map of the northeastern region. "And what about that spy..."

Xu Qi'an's resurrection raised the question: Should the plan to attack the Church of the Warlock God still proceed?

"We attack the Church of the Warlock God after autumn harvest; the plan remains unchanged." Wei Yuan's expression was cold, and his tone was filled with strong confidence.

Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai took their leave. The former intended to visit the Xu residence again, but as soon as they stepped out of the constabulary, they ran into Xu Qi'an, who was riding in.

"You're pretty tactful," Nangong Qianrou said with a click of her tongue. "Anyone who doesn't know better might think that Father has taken in another adopted son."

Xu Qi'an retorted, also clicking his tongue, "You're well versed in ambiguity."

Nangong Qianrou was suddenly furious, mistakenly thinking that Xu Qi'an was mocking his androgynous appearance, and furrowed his brows: "Why didn't you just die in Yunzhou?"

As soon as the words left his mouth, an image flashed in Xu Qi'an's mind: Nangong Qianrou raising his right hand and swinging his arm to slap him...

With a sudden burst of intuition, Xu Qi'an lowered his body and dodged Nangong Qianrou's slap by the narrowest of margins, then quickly darted into the constabulary.

"Can't be bothered to argue with you. I'm off to see Duke Wei."

In front of a fourth-rank Gold Gong, that was the best move Xu Qi'an could pull off. Any further delay would have resulted in a severe beating.

Nangong Qianrou stood there, slightly dazed as he watched Xu Qi'an's retreating figure, then looked down at his hand... He dodged?

In the Refining Spirit realm, a martial artist's perception of danger was extremely sharp, allowing them to easily detect hostility or ambushes around them. Even with their eyes closed, they could fight in the chaos of battle. For a martial artist, reaching the Refining Spirit realm signifies a peak in individual combat ability.

However, with Nangong Qianrou's fourth-rank cultivation, even if he held back, he should have easily been able to land a slap on a Refining Spirit martial artist before they sensed the danger and reacted.

"How is that possible..." Nangong Qianrou frowned slightly.

...

As Xu Qi'an made his way through the constabulary, he received countless astonished looks. Whether they were Nightwatchers or clerks, everyone stared at him, dumbfounded.

The news of Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an's death in the line of duty had long since spread throughout the constabulary. For the past few days, it had been the topic of conversation during breaks. If one were to write a headline using the style of his previous life, it would read:

**\*\*\*#Shocking! Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an Returns, Duke Wei is Astounded!\*\*\***

**\*\*\*#What Did the Promising Bronze Gong Do in Yunzhou That Ruined His Life?#\*\*\***

But now, seeing Xu Qi'an, who had been dead for half a month, striding through the constabulary alive and well, and even waving cheerfully at everyone, the Nightwatchers were left with a flurry of questions.

"In broad daylight, can ghosts really enter our constabulary? And how did someone become so handsome after dying?"

"What do we do? This might be Xu Ningyan's ghost; we can't just attack him, right? It wouldn't be good if his soul was scattered."

"Are you blind? Do ghosts have shadows? That might be Xu Ningyan's brother. Xu Ningyan was never this good-looking."

Amidst the murmurs, Xu Qi'an arrived at the Tower of Noble Spirit, where the guards stared at him in disbelief.

"I need to see Duke Wei. Report to him immediately."

The guard, turning back several times as he went, entered the building. A moment later, he returned and said, "Duke Wei will see you now... Sir Xu, weren't you, weren't you..."

Xu Qi'an touched his face and replied in a rich voice, "I am Xu Qi'an's brother, sent by Duke Wei to take over my brother's duties."

"Oh, I see. May I ask your name, sir?"

"Xu Qian."[^1]

The guard thought to himself, \_Why does that sound like a woman's name?\_

Outwardly, he respectfully said, "Please, come in."

Upon entering the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi'an ascended to the tea room on the seventh floor and met with Wei Yuan, whom he hadn't seen for over a month. Wei Yuan was still dressed in his elegant green robe, his temples tinged with grey, and fine crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. Despite his age, he remained a refined and handsome old gentleman.

\*With my looks now, I'll definitely be no less charming than Wei Yuan when I'm old...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself. He cupped his fists and said loudly, "Subordinate Xu Qi'an pays his respects to Duke Wei."

Wei Yuan seemed momentarily lost in thought but responded warmly, "Sit down."

In an unprecedented gesture, Wei Yuan personally poured him a cup of hot tea and said calmly, "Tell me everything about what happened in Yunzhou."

It was a long story, so Xu Qi'an recounted the events in Yunzhou in detail, including the identities of Li Miaozen as the Holy Maiden of the Heavenly Sect.

He withheld nothing except for matters concerning the monk Shenshu, which were of too great significance.

Wei Yuan was too perceptive; hiding too much would be easily detected. Moreover, the Grand Eunuch genuinely valued and nurtured him, so Xu Qi'an repaid his kindness with trust.

As expected, after taking a sip of tea, Wei Yuan said, "Yang Qianhuan has been following you throughout."

Xu Qi'an was initially stunned, slightly taken aback. He wasn't foolish and quickly realized what this might imply. He asked, "Why would Brother Yang be following me?"

"He wouldn't follow you without reason. From what I know of him, apart from indulging in odd and quirky things, he isn't particularly concerned about anything else," Wei Yuan said with an inscrutable smile. "But what if it was Jianzheng's idea?"

\*Jianzheng knows my secret... If it was at his behest, then it makes sense.\*

Xu Qi'an discreetly glanced at Wei Yuan, wondering if this highly astute individual had also noticed something.

Wei Yuan didn't dwell on the topic and continued, "As for that third-grade Arcanist, let's temporarily consider him as such. I don't believe he is Sun Xuanji from the Sitianjian. However, this matter does remind me of something else."

Xu Qi'an perked up, "Please enlighten me, Duke Wei."

\*Duke Wei is reliable, unlike Daoist Jinlian, who always speaks in riddles. Wei Yuan almost never withholds anything from me.\*

"You're familiar with Chu Caiwei of the Sitianjian, as well as Song Qing. Do you know their true identities?"

"Jianzheng's personal disciples?" Xu Qi'an replied uncertainly.

The White-Robed Arcanists of the Sitianjian weren't all Jianzheng's disciples. It was similar to the great Confucians at the Cloud Deer Academy who often lectured but had few personal disciples. Song Qing, Chu Caiwei, and Yang Qianhuan were indeed Jianzheng's personal disciples.

"Yang Qianhuan is Jianzheng's third disciple, Song Qing is the fourth, and Chu Caiwei is the sixth. The White-Robed Arcanists refer to her as Little Junior Sister," Wei Yuan explained.

\*... What's the problem with that?\* Xu Qi'an didn't understand.

"But Jianzheng only has five personal disciples," Wei Yuan said softly.

... Xu Qi'an's pupils contracted as he finally understood Wei Yuan's implication. Jianzheng had only five disciples, yet Chu Caiwei was the sixth. So where is the missing disciple?

What happened to that disciple?

"Sun Xuanji is the second disciple," Wei Yuan added.

"Then, the identities of the first and fifth disciples remain unknown," Xu Qi'an said.

For a moment, the two men didn't speak, and the tea room fell into a brief silence.

After finishing his cup of tea, Wei Yuan continued, "You woke up at a bad time."

"What do you mean by that, Duke Wei?" Xu Qi'an didn't understand.

"Zhang Xingying submitted a memorial, requesting the court to posthumously honor you. After discussing the matter, His Majesty and the officials decided to grant you the title of Viscount of Changle County. The imperial edict will be issued in a few days."

Wei Yuan sighed, "Now that you're alive, the cabinet will likely revoke the edict, and His Majesty will probably agree."

"That's no big deal. As long as I don't miss out on the reward money, I'm fine," Xu Qi'an said with a shrug.

\*Viscount of Changle County—sounds like a junior title... No, a son's title.\*[^2]

\*In the future, if I meet an official from Changle County, and they introduce themselves, saying: Hello, I'm xxx from Changle County.\*

\*And I say: I'm the Viscount of Changle County.\*

People unfamiliar with titles might think I'm their son.

Wei Yuan gave him a look, "Money is just an external possession. The significance of a title can't be compared to silver. Even if you become a Silver Gong and hold power, your status won't be high enough to make it to the top. Only a title can truly separate you from the commoners and establish your family among the nobility. If you're ennobled, the Xu family will no longer be ordinary but part of the elite.

"In the future, when you marry, commoner women won't be eligible. Only daughters of noble families will be a match for you."

"Can I marry a princess?" Xu Qi'an asked quietly.

... Wei Yuan nodded, "Theoretically, yes."

A princess could never marry a commoner; her future husband must be a noble. Although a viscount's title isn't high, it's still a title.

"But for some reason, His Majesty doesn't like you. If he doesn't agree, there's nothing anyone can do," Wei Yuan said, then smiled:

"Fortunately, you're not without merit and still have some room to manoeuvre."

"Please advise me, Duke Wei."

"A few days ago, something major happened in the palace. Consort Fu died unexpectedly, falling from a tower in disarray. At the time, the only person in the room was the Crown Prince, who was drunk. The case is particularly tricky as it concerns the royal family's reputation and involves the potential dethroning of the Crown Prince. The three legal departments are reluctant to get involved and will likely handle it passively."

\*Oh holy fuck... The Crown Prince violated the emperor's consort?\*

Xu Qi'an shook his head quickly, "Duke Wei, you're setting me up. How can I meddle in the royal family's scandal?"

"No need to worry," Wei Yuan waved dismissively. "This matter is already known to all the civil and military officials. One more person won't make a difference. If you can uncover the truth, great. If not, you can just back out."

"If your abilities fall short, at most, you'll receive a minor punishment. Even if His Majesty dislikes you, he can't just execute a viscount. The noble faction wouldn't allow it."

\*I see. Duke Wei's advice is to persuade Emperor Yuanjing to grant me the title first. Then, when the time comes, I can claim my abilities are insufficient and bow out.\* \*At worst, I'll get a minor punishment but still walk away with a title. Duke Wei is... truly cunning (a damn LYB!).\*

"The Crown Prince is Princess Lin'an's elder brother," Xu Qi'an suddenly remembered the charming and affectionate little fish he had taken in.

The little queen of the night market must be heartbroken and helpless now.

"You haven't gotten entangled with Princess Lin'an, have you?" Wei Yuan squinted at him.

"No, no," Xu Qi'an quickly shook his head.

Wei Yuan nodded in relief.

...

The Next Day, in the Imperial Study.

"The three-day deadline has passed, and your response to me is simply 'The case is complex with many uncertainties, please may we more time'?"

Emperor Yuanjing furiously slammed several memorials onto the three ministers in front of him.

The memorials submitted by the Chief Justice of the High Court, the Minister of Law, and Wei Yuan were strikingly similar, as if they had copied each other's work—and copied the wrong answers at that.

Emperor Yuanjing was so angry that he pounded the table.

The Minister of Law, feeling ashamed, said, "Your Majesty, this case is filled with doubts and shrouded in mystery. Your servant has already exerted all his efforts. Please grant us a few more days."

The Chief Justice added, "Your lowly servant is incapable and requests to retire to the country."

"You..." Emperor Yuanjing waved his large hand, sweeping all the memorials, inkstones, and brushes off the table, trembling with rage:

"I'll have you all executed."

The three ministers immediately knelt down and cried out, "Your servant's death is of no consequence, but Your Majesty must take care of your dragon body."

\_Did they rehearse these lines?\_ Emperor Yuanjing was livid.

The other ministers on both sides kept their eyes down, focused on their noses, and those who usually enjoyed arguing with Wei Yuan kept silent.

This case had to be handled, of course, but opinions from different factions had yet to align. The Crown Prince's supporters were thinking about how to exonerate him, while the other factions were considering which prince should become the future heir if the Crown Prince were deposed.

Though their opinions differed, everyone agreed on one thing: to delay. Consort Fu's death wasn't the main issue; the real concern was the battle for the imperial succession that would follow this case.

It was a conflict that promised to be as bloody and tumultuous as the imperial evaluation.

Each clique needed time to deliberate, to take sides, and to make arrangements.

In such a situation where the court's objectives were aligned, even Emperor Yuanjing could do nothing but seethe with impotent rage, unless he decided to ignore the truth and deposed the Crown Prince on the spot—but that would most likely be rejected by the cabinet.

"Your Majesty, please calm yourself. This minister has something to report." Prime Minister Wang stepped forward, casually setting aside the case of Consort Fu and said, "According to what this minister has learned, the Bronze Gong of the Nightwatchers, Xu Qi'an, did not die. He strangely revived yesterday, so the matter of his ennoblement should be revoked."

The Imperial Study filled with the murmurs of ministers.

\_That Bronze Gong surnamed Xu is still alive?\_ The Chief Justice and the Minister of Law had mixed feelings.

Emperor Yuanjing was momentarily stunned, then he suppressed his anger, turned to Wei Yuan, and asked in a deep voice, "Lord Wei, is the Prime Minister's statement true?"

"It is indeed true," Wei Yuan replied with a bow.

Immediately, one of the Censors stepped forward and loudly said, "Zhang Xingying falsely reported the case, deceiving His Majesty. Please, Your Majesty, punish him."

Emperor Yuanjing ignored this and continued looking at Wei Yuan, asking, "Why is this?"

"Xu Qi'an did not die. Before engaging the rebel forces, he took the Sitianjian's Pill of Rebirth. After exhausting his strength, he fell into a state of feigned death and only awoke yesterday. Zhang Xingying mistakenly believed Xu Qi'an had died, so he cannot be blamed," Wei Yuan explained.

\_Pill of Rebirth...\_ Emperor Yuanjing felt as if he had swallowed a fly. He had once asked Jianzheng for this pill, but Jianzheng refused, claiming it was no longer available.

Yet now, a mere Bronze Gong had managed to obtain this rare and miraculous elixir.

"How did he acquire such an elixir?" Emperor Yuanjing's lips twitched.

"It was a gift from Chu Caiwei of the Sitianjian," Wei Yuan replied.

Emperor Yuanjing pondered for a few seconds, then slowly nodded, "The ennoblement is to be revoked. Also, summon Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an to see me immediately."

Wei Yuan nodded calmly and bowed, "As you command."

...

Xu Qi'an received the summons and, by late morning, was galloping towards the palace. After the Huben Guards confirmed his identity, he was allowed inside.

Inside the palace gates, Wei Yuan, clad in a blue robe, stood with his hands behind his back, waiting with Nangong Qianrou by his side.

Xu Qi'an hurried forward and called out, "Duke Wei."

Wei Yuan nodded, "His Majesty has summoned you regarding Consort Fu's case." He paused, then added meaningfully, "The ennoblement has been revoked."

\_They really revoked it, huh?\_ \*The news had been out for three days, and they still managed to pull it back.\* \_How irregular...\_ Xu Qi'an grumbled internally but said aloud, "I understand."

Following Wei Yuan into the Imperial Study, they found that Emperor Yuanjing was not there. An elderly eunuch in a robe with a python design said, "His Majesty is meditating at Lingbao Temple with the National Teacher. He will return after noon; please wait."

This wait lasted for two hours.

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At Lingbao Temple, after finishing his meditation, a refreshed Emperor Yuanjing opened his eyes and sighed, "National Teacher, when will I be able to form my Golden Core?"

Beneath her robe, which couldn't fully conceal her voluptuous figure, the enchantingly beautiful Luo Yuheng kept her eyes closed and replied in a melodious and magnetic voice, "Your Majesty will achieve it soon, as long as you can set aside worldly affairs and devote yourself to cultivation."

Emperor Yuanjing stared at the breathtakingly beautiful Daoist nun before him. Her features were stunning, with an allure that could captivate any soul. The vermilion mark on her forehead only enhanced her ethereal presence—an immortal, yet one who could be defiled.

Emperor Yuanjing sighed again. Actually, all it would take for him to progress was dual cultivation, but even as an emperor, he couldn't force the leader of the Human Sect's hand.

Not only was she a second-rank master, but even if he could overpower her with force, dual cultivation required mutual alignment of techniques, which couldn't be achieved by force.

"When will the National Teacher reach the first rank?" Emperor Yuanjing asked.

Luo Yuheng gently shook her head.

"Sigh, Jianzheng's intentions are becoming harder for me to understand. I once asked him for the Pill of Rebirth, and he refused, yet today I find that even a mere Bronze Gong can enjoy this miraculous medicine."

Luo Yuheng opened her eyes and curiously asked, "A Bronze Gong?"

Emperor Yuanjing waved dismissively, "This person is of no consequence. I'll return to the palace first. Tomorrow, I'll come again to meditate and seek enlightenment with the National Teacher."

After returning to the palace and learning that Xu Qi'an had been waiting in the Imperial Study, Emperor Yuanjing still did not go there immediately. Instead, after a thorough bath, he finally made his way to the study.

Inside the Imperial Study.

Xu Qi'an called out loudly, "Your lowly subordinate pays his respects to Your Majesty."

Emperor Yuanjing stared at him sharply. Without mentioning the Pill of Rebirth or praising the Bronze Gong's contributions in Yunzhou, he went straight to the point:

"A few days ago, Consort Fu fell from a tower to her death. There are hidden truths behind this case. I give you three days to uncover them. If you fail, you will be severely punished."

Xu Qi'an immediately bowed deeply, bending at a ninety-degree angle, and shouted, "Your Majesty, please grant me death."

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Chapter 235. Hengyuan: Three, I've Known Your True Identity Long Ago



... Emperor Yuanjing's words choked in his mouth; he was completely caught off guard by Xu Qi'an's response.

Usually, when he was difficult, officials would plead, "Your Majesty, I beg for retirement," which was a standard tactic of seasoned bureaucrats. But this little Bronze Gong was even more straightforward—he asked for death.

Emperor Yuanjing's face instantly darkened. Rulers often used harsh words to assert their authority, whether it was an emperor or a county magistrate, they liked to say, "Do this for me, or else I'll (We'll) have you dealt with severely."

This was not unusual; after all, the hierarchy was clear, and ministers and subordinates could only accept orders and obediently comply.

But who would have thought that this Bronze Gong would dare to push back, making Emperor Yuanjing feel uncomfortable.

Especially seeing the significant changes in Xu Qi'an, Emperor Yuanjing was even more displeased, though at the same time he sighed at the extraordinary power of the Pill of Rebirth, this rare miracle medicine.

So difficult to make that in sixty years the Jianzheng had only managed to produce three.

Emperor Yuanjing sternly asked, "Xu Qi'an, do you think we won't kill you?"

Emperor Yuanjing had ruled for thirty-six years, and his imperial might was overwhelming. The air in the Imperial Study seemed to grow colder, causing the eunuchs present to immediately lower their heads, not daring to look at the dragon visage.

The only one who could remain composed in the emperor's presence was Wei Yuan.

Xu Qi'an naturally wouldn't continue to push back. Without any fear in his heart, he immediately shifted from his aggressive stance to a more submissive one, saying in a humble tone:

"Your Majesty, please forgive me. Your humble servant fought to protect the Provincial Governor in Yunzhou, battling the rebel army and personally killing two of their commanders.

"Your humble servant worked tirelessly in Yunzhou, uncovering the collusion between the Provincial Administrator Song Changfu and the Church of the Warlock God, and clearing the name of Commander Yang Chuannan.

"All these things are insignificant, and your humble servant would never bring them up to claim credit. As for the Sangpo Case and the Pingyang Princess Case, your humble servant has long forgotten and will never bring them up again.

"However, your servant's vitality is greatly diminished, and his spirit is weakened. Since waking up, he has often suffered from severe headaches and are truly incapable of assisting Your Majesty further."

Emperor Yuanjing stared at him, for a moment unable to say anything harsh.

This little Bronze Gong deliberately mentioned a whole series of cases to emphasise his achievements, first securing his position as a meritorious official, and then citing his physical ailments to avoid further responsibilities, demonstrating his deep understanding of court politics.

Wei Yuan immediately spoke up, "Your Majesty, Xu Qi'an is just a Bronze Gong. Even if he is exceptionally capable, his vitality, Qi, and spirit is severely depleted. His life may be of little consequence, however delaying the investigation and leaving Consort Fu's case unresolved would be a serious matter."

After a pause, he looked at Xu Qi'an and said, "You may go back and rest. His Majesty will not send an underfed soldier into battle."

\*The emperor does not send underfed soldiers...\*

Emperor Yuanjing glanced at Wei Yuan, pondered for a moment, and said, "Xu Qi'an, the Sitianjian has many prescriptions for nourishing the spirit. Lingbao Temple also has no shortage of spiritual pills. If you are unwell, we can grant you some of these medicines."

"We remember your contributions in Yunzhou and am considering bestowing upon you the title of Viscount. The imperial grace is vast; do not disappoint it."

In the end, Xu Qi'an was just a minor figure, not worth Emperor Yuanjing's deliberate targeting. When the cabinet proposed revoking the title, Emperor Yuanjing went along with it. But now that Xu Qi'an was needed, Emperor Yuanjing didn't mind offering some rewards. Though, he was very clear; he had been outmanoeuvred.

"Thank you, Your Majesty, for your boundless grace. Your Majesty is wise and mighty, a monarch for the ages," Xu Qi'an loudly declared.

Emperor Yuanjing nodded slightly, "I want the truth of this case as soon as possible."

"Your humble servant will do his utmost until his death."

Seeing the Bronze Gong being so tactful, Emperor Yuanjing felt somewhat satisfied and casually dismissed him, "You may withdraw."

...

As they left the Imperial Study and walked across the empty square, Wei Yuan squinted, looking straight ahead with a faint smile, "Did you learn something?"

"I did," Xu Qi'an replied.

He had genuinely learned something, not like in his school days when the teacher would ask, "Have you all understood?" and all the students would loudly reply, "Yes!" while actually understanding nothing.

The lesson Wei Yuan wanted to teach was simple: the emperor is also human, the emperor has weaknesses, and the emperor is bound by rules, unable to act arbitrarily and recklessly.

At the same time, the emperor is not omnipotent; he also has needs. As long as you possess something the emperor "needs," there is a lot of room for maneuver.

Take this case, for instance. The three departments were all shirking responsibility and delaying the investigation. What could Emperor Yuanjing do? At most, he could impose punishments, but he couldn't truly dismiss or execute them.

In such a situation, Xu Qi'an, who had solved several major cases and offended many officials, was the perfect candidate to investigate.

Since the emperor wanted to use you, it was necessary to reasonably negotiate benefits for yourself.

And once he became a Viscount, Xu Qi'an could make a symbolic effort, but failing to solve the case due to "insufficient ability" would still be reasonable.

After all, he wasn't a celestial.

At that point, Emperor Yuanjing's anger would be expected, but as a Viscount, Xu Qi'an would at most face some punishment, such as flogging, salary reduction, or even demotion.

However, a noble title is not something that can be taken away easily. It is a means for the court to win people's hearts and can only be granted to those who have made great contributions.

Accordingly, the conditions for stripping a noble title are also strict; it cannot be revoked just because the emperor says so. Otherwise, the title would be too cheap and would not command respect.

As for whether Emperor Yuanjing would go back on his word, neither Xu Qi'an nor Wei Yuan had considered it. A dignified emperor would not be so shameless. Even if Emperor Yuanjing wanted to renege, Xu Qi'an could still stall the investigation.

For every tactic, there is a counter-tactic.

"Sir Xu, please wait."

A shrill voice called from behind.

Xu Qi'an and Wei Yuan stopped and turned around. It was the old eunuch by Emperor Yuanjing's side, running up with a gold token in his hand.

"This is the gold token bestowed by His Majesty. Sir Xu can enter the palace to investigate at any time, but you must be accompanied by a palace attendant." The old eunuch presented the gold token.

Xu Qi'an took it and weighed it in his hand. It was quite hefty.

This gold token was different from the one he had received before. The front of this token had an additional character "Inner" [内], signifying that it allowed him to move within the inner palace, a level higher than before.

"Thank you, milord," Xu Qi'an cupped his hands.

The old eunuch nodded and said no more, turning to leave.

"Wait a moment, milord." Xu Qi'an called after him.

The old eunuch turned back.

"His Majesty's grace is boundless. I will begin the investigation today. Please may milord assign a palace attendant to assist me," Xu Qi'an said.

A palace attendant was the lowest rank among the eunuchs... in fact even using the term "eunuch" wasn't accurate; eunuchs had positions and titles.

A palace attendant was the lowest rank... essentially the one who cleaned up after others.

The old eunuch appreciated Xu Qi'an's enthusiasm for his work, and his smile deepened as he asked, "If I may ask, Sir Xu, where do you plan to start?"

Xu Qi'an grinned, "I'll start with Princess Lin'an."

The old eunuch returned to the Imperial Study, and shortly after, a young eunuch hurried out to greet Wei Yuan and Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an nodded, escorted Wei Yuan to the palace gates, and then, accompanied by the palace attendant, headed towards Princess Lin'an's Shaoyin Courtyard.

...

Shaoyin Courtyard.

In the desolate back garden, Lin'an sat in a pavilion, staring blankly at the still pond.

The pond had frozen over the previous night, and now, under the warm sunlight, it was gradually thawing, with only a few patches of floating ice remaining.

In just five days, Lin'an had grown noticeably thinner; even her once plump, oval face now seemed a bit gaunt. Her peach blossom eyes, which had once been bright and slightly dreamy, always casting enchanting glances at everyone, now lacked their former sparkle.

From a young age, except for being beaten up by Huaqing, she had always been carefree and favored by fate.

Because Emperor Yuanjing had devoted himself to cultivation early on, he did not have particularly many children, hence the infighting among the princes and princesses wasn't as fierce as it could have been.

Moreover, with her elder brother as the Crown Prince and her own coquettish charm, she had always had a smooth ride.

But the continuous stream of bad news in recent days had deeply troubled her, leaving her devastated.

Earlier today, she had cried her heart out in front of her mother, both mother and daughter worrying about the Crown Prince's future. After returning, Lin'an had sat in the pavilion, lost in thought.

\*If it were Huaqing, she would undoubtedly be incredibly strong, the kind of woman who wouldn't be defeated by anything... big brother would definitely not do such a thing, but who would frame him... The Fourth Prince, Huaqing's full brother?\*

This thought suddenly flashed through Lin'an's mind.

Although she wasn't as smart as Huaqing, was poor at studying, and needed the tutor to threaten her with a bamboo rod before she would grudgingly recite a few scriptures through tears, she wasn't

stupid. Given her conviction that her elder brother was innocent, it didn't take much thinking to figure out that the biggest beneficiary if the Crown Prince were deposed would be the most suspicious.

With this thought, Lin'an's eyes regained a bit of their former brightness as she began to think more deeply, pondering over many questions.

For instance, how did the Fourth Prince secretly kill Consort Fu and frame her elder brother? Who were his accomplices—the Empress? Huaiqing?

And so on.

But the more she thought, the more confused she became, until her thoughts were in such a tangle that she frustratingly smacked her own head.

“If only he were here, he would definitely solve the case in no time,” Lin'an stamped her foot in frustration.

But the next moment, her face fell, her eyebrows drooping as she lost her spirit.

But... he's not here anymore.

“Your Highness, Your Highness.”

A guard with a sword hurried over, stopping at the pavilion to bow. “Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an requests an audience... He's waiting in the front courtyard.”

Lin'an reacted as if someone had struck her. She was stunned for three or four seconds before suddenly standing up and striding over to the guard, glaring at him with her beautiful eyes.

“What did you say?”

“Bronze Gong Xu Qi'an requests an audience,” the guard repeated.

Blood rushed to Lin'an's face as she flew into a rage, yanking the guard's sword from its scabbard and gritting her teeth.

“You dog! How dare you play tricks on me? The Crown Prince hasn't been deposed yet!”

Her real anger was fueled by the fact that the guard had dared to make a joke about Xu Qi'an.

The guard quickly retreated, thinking it would be terribly unjust if he got slashed for this. As he backed away, he explained, “It really is Sir Xu. He's right in the front courtyard. Your Highness will see him for yourself.”

Lin'an didn't even drop the sword as she hurried towards the front courtyard.

From a distance, Xu Qi'an was the first to spot the furious, sword-wielding Lin'an. Seeing her charging like she was ready for battle, he was taken aback.

\_I barely made it back from the brink of death, sis are you planning to send me right back?\_

He quickly stowed away the little trinket he had prepared to amuse her and hid behind a rockery.

“Where is Xu Qi'an, where is Xu Qi'an?”

Lin'an looked around the front courtyard with the sword in hand, but she didn't see the familiar figure. Her bright eyes gradually dimmed.

"Your Highness, Sir Xu is behind the rockery," whispered the eunuch that came with him.

Lin'an's peach blossom eyes instantly lit up again as she eagerly walked towards the rockery. Sure enough, she saw... Xu Qi'an?

She hesitated. The person before her was handsome and robust, with strong brows and bright eyes, a tall nose, and sharply defined lips.

Then, her attention was caught by the two puppets Xu Qi'an was holding—a man and a woman. The woman was dressed as a noble lady, and the man was an imposing general in armour.

Xu Qi'an cleared his throat and manipulated the general, making it speak in a deep voice, "Your Highness, I've returned after having my face redone in Korea."

Then, he switched to a high-pitched voice for the lady, "Where is Korea?"

General: "Oh, it's Yunzhou. I misspoke."

Lady: "Didn't you die in Yunzhou?"

General: "I did die, but because I was thinking of Your Highness, I moved the King of Hell to let me return."

Lady: "Oh, you're so annoying."

Lin'an found this amusing and burst out laughing, only to suddenly feel something cold on her face. Unknowingly, tears had started rolling down her cheeks.

Feeling embarrassed, she quickly turned away and angrily explained, "The wind is a bit strong today, blowing sand into my eyes."

As a lively, coquettish girl who loved to pout, Lin'an was easily taken in by such antics. Lacking any romantic experience, her ability to spot such lowly tactics was poor, making her a prime target for charmers.

Of course, Xu Qi'an was definitely not one of those.

Xu Qi'an laughed, "How strange, the sand only got into Your Highness's eyes. Could it be because Your Highness is so beautiful?"

Caught out, Lin'an snapped angrily, "You running dog."

"I'm not a running dog."

"You are a running dog, Running Dog Xu Qi'an."

"Dog-sun Lin'an."

"Dog- dog what?" Princess Lin'an didn't know "sun" was a verb.[^1]

"Nothing," Xu Qi'an took advantage of her not knowing the vocabulary.

"Did you just insult me?" Lin'an demanded, her face stern.

"No, that was just me expressing my deepest hopes for Your Highness," Xu Qi'an replied, dead serious.

Coming out from behind the rockery, Biaobiao returned the sword to the guard and led Xu Qi'an into the hall. The servant following them shot a strange look at the Second Princess.

The Second Princess's beautiful, lively eyes were red and swollen, clearly showing she had just cried.

After they took their seats, palace maids served tea and snacks. Xu Qi'an waved his hand dismissively and said, "Little eunuch, you may leave. The princess and I have a private matter to discuss."

"This..." The young eunuch hesitated.

"Get out, shoo shoo shoo!" Biaobiao's willow-like brows furrowed, and she sharply scolded, "We have words to speak with Sir Xu. Who are you to eavesdrop? Believe me, I'll have you dragged out and flogged a hundred times."

The young eunuch had no choice but to leave.

"Why is he following you? And how did you come back alive? Didn't Huaiqing say you were dead?" Biaobiao asked, watching the eunuch's retreating figure cross the threshold and disappear, before turning her gaze back to Xu Qi'an, a smile forming on her pretty face.

"He's here to keep an eye on me," Xu Qi'an replied, sipping some hot tea and nibbling on a pastry. He had waited in the imperial study for over two hours, missing lunch.

"As for how I survived, that's a long story..."

He began recounting the events of the Yunzhou case to the Lin'an Princess, slightly modifying the details. Of course, he wasn't making things up—just embellishing his role and downplaying the contributions of others.

Biaobiao loved listening to stories. Immediately, she was engrossed, and gradually she felt as if she was living the tale herself. When Xu Qi'an explained how he stayed up all night to solve the puzzle left by the secret agent Zhou Min, her small hand slapped the table hard, and she loudly praised him.

She leaned forward, resting her chin in her hand, and listened intently.

Xu Qi'an discreetly glanced at the princess's chest and couldn't help feeling a bit disappointed. Compared to her elder sister, Lin'an was still lacking.

A woman who can't make the table bear the pressure wasn't a good woman.

When she heard about the female ghost trying to seduce Xu Qi'an and his companions, with two of his colleagues falling under her spell while Xu Qi'an resisted through sheer willpower, Biaobiao expressed her admiration, praising him: "As expected of someone I value highly. When I first saw you, I knew you were no ordinary person."

Xu Qi'an thanked her highness for her discerning eye, while inwardly he mocked, \*Weren't you just trying to recruit me to compete with Huaiqing?\*

Finally, Xu Qi'an began to describe his solo confrontation with thousands of soldiers, how he was surrounded by countless enemies, facing a rain of arrows and a forest of spears, yet didn't retreat a single step, cutting down two hundred foes before reinforcements arrived.

Biaobiao was moved to tears, her nose turning red from crying.

"Your Highness, you should have seen the scene at the time. With one shout, I terrified the thousand rebel soldiers. They only fought me because they had no choice. If I hadn't been in a bad state then, none of them would have survived."

Biaobiao nodded vigorously, fully believing him.

After all, she had heard about Xu Qi'an's deeds from her royal brother before. Everyone said Xu Qi'an had heroically sacrificed himself, saving the Inspector and the Gold Gong from the Nightwatchers.

Having finished his boast, Xu Qi'an remembered the main issue and said, "By the way, I'm here this time under the Emperor's orders to thoroughly investigate Consort Fu's case."

Biaobiao's eyes suddenly lit up, and she said joyfully, "I knew it! You're back, and now you can clear my brother the Crown Prince's name."

"I will always serve you, Princess, as your most loyal servant," Xu Qi'an said sincerely, boosting his favor with Lin'an.

"I have a few questions for you, Princess. What did Consort Fu look like?"

"Naturally, she was very beautiful."

\*The Emperor really wasted a treasure...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself and then asked, "Is the Crown Prince a womaniser?"

"Of course not," Lin'an denied immediately. "Other than the Crown Prince's main consort, he only has sixteen other consorts, concubines, and maids combined."

"....."

\*It turns out I'm a truly good man. The ultimate good man is me, and I am Xu Qi'an!\* Xu Qi'an thought.

"Has he ever caused trouble while drunk?"

"No."

"What kind of wine was he drinking?"

"Bairichun, a wine known to boost virility. It was sent by the Empress to my mother. Do you think she framed him?" Lin'an whispered.

Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment and said, "I understand."

Lin'an was overjoyed and asked in a sweet voice, "What do you understand? Xu Ningyan, have you solved the case?"

.....

The Xu Manor.



Exhausted, Xu Xinnian didn't immediately return to the academy. Today was the 10th of February, and with the imperial exams only five days away, there was really no need to return.

These days, he stayed at home, waiting for the exams to arrive.

After lunch, he helped his father, Xu Pingzhi, see off the Xu clan members. Xu Xinnian, drained both mentally and physically, had no desire to study. He only wanted to go back to his room and sleep.

But then, Old Zhang from the gate hurriedly ran in, saying, "Erlang, there's a monk outside who calls himself Hengyuan and wants to see you."

"Hengyuan?" Xu Erlang frowned, feeling the name was familiar but not recalling where he had heard it.

As a disciple of Confucianism, he didn't believe in Buddhism and had no connections with the Buddhist house.

"He also said he's an acquaintance of yours," Old Zhang added.

Xu Erlang snorted and looked at Xu Pingzhi. "Father, perhaps he's here to offer funeral services after hearing of our mourning. You should prepare some copper coins to send him away. I'm going to rest."

Old Zhang took a silver coin and went out of the mansion, handing it to the burly middle-aged monk. "Master, the household doesn't need any rites. Please take your leave."

Master Hengyuan waved his hand, saying, "I am not here to solicit alms." But he still took the silver coin, adding, "Is the second young master really not going to see me?"

\*What's wrong with Number Three?\*

Even though they had never met in person, the monk had helped him multiple times, and with his brother Xu Qi'an's connection, regardless of the circumstances, he should at least meet him and pay his respects, especially if this could be his last chance to see Xu Qi'an.

\*Hmm, he might still be trying to keep his identity secret, thinking I haven't realised who he truly is, so he's pretending not to know me?\*

\*Hmph, he's underestimating my wisdom.\*

Master Hengyuan pressed his palms together, bowed slightly, then stepped aside. He pulled out the fragment of the Earth Book from his robe and, using his finger as a pen, sent a message:

**【Daoist Jinlian, could you block the others? I have something to say to Number Three.】**

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## Chapter 236. Autopsy

\*I Understand that your brother the crown prince is a lecher...\* Xu Qi'an had only casually replied without thinking, but Biaobiao mistakenly thought he had already solved the case.

"It's too early to say whether His Highness the Crown Prince is innocent." Xu Qi'an shook his head.

As the saying goes, "a drunk man's actions often reveal his true nature." When a man drinks too much, he can become reckless and do things he wouldn't normally dare. If the Crown Prince had been as cautious and meticulous as Lin'an described, the more he suppressed his desires, the more explosive they would be when he was intoxicated.

"Why do you think it was the Fourth Prince and the Empress who framed the Crown Prince?" Xu Qi'an asked, partly wanting to gossip and partly to investigate.

The Fourth Prince was Huaiqing's full brother, both born of the Empress. Although the Fourth Prince was not the eldest son overall, he was still a son by the empress. By rights, his claim was more justified than Lin'an's brother.

However, due to the succession crisis two hundred years ago, which was still recorded in history and remained a significant event in the minds of the Great Feng's scholars, there was a psychological shadow regarding any conflict for the throne.

Therefore, Emperor Yuanjing's decision to make the eldest son of a concubine the Crown Prince was not entirely without reason.

"The Empress naturally wants the Fourth Prince to become the Crown Prince. Let me tell you, among all the royal brothers, only the Fourth Prince and the Crown Prince care most about state affairs. Would the Fourth Prince be this enthusiastic if he didn't want to be the Crown Prince?"

"It is indeed against convention for His Majesty to appoint the eldest son of a concubine as the Crown Prince when the Empress has a son." Xu Qi'an didn't hold back in front of Biaobiao.

These matters would typically be sensitive to inquire about, even with the official mandate to investigate. But with Biaobiao, he could ask freely.

After all, she was one of his own.

"That's because my mother was the most favoured and the most beautiful back then." Biaobiao proudly lifted her chin, her face as pretty as a picture.

\*Based on what I saw at the ancestor worship ceremony, it was clear that the Empress was superior to Imperial Concubine Chen. That demeanour, that beauty—even though she had passed the prime of her life, her charm still surpassed that of ordinary women. If she were twenty years younger, she would likely outshine both Lin'an and Huaiqing...\*

\*But being favoured isn't solely about looks; there are many factors involved, such as personality, skill, and other techniques... It's all quite complicated.\*

\*Did Emperor Yuanjing really dislike the Empress so much as to appoint a concubine's son as Crown Prince?\*

Seeing Xu Qi'an lost in thought, Biaobiao suddenly became wary. "Do you think Huaiqing might be secretly manipulating this?"

Xu Qi'an looked at the radiant beauty of the Second Princess and asked, "What if she is?"

Biaobiao first raised her delicate brows, like a proud little hen, but then quickly deflated, her brows drooping:

"I still have to admit that Huaiqing is cunning and unscrupulous..."

She complained, "I can't outsmart her."

\*Hmm, for the Princess to openly admit in front of me that she can't outmatch her rival Huaiqing, it shows she's increasingly trusting me...\* Xu Qi'an nodded slightly, feeling somewhat satisfied.

At that moment, he suddenly felt a pang in his heart, knowing that someone in the Earth Book chat group had just spoken up.

"Your Highness, I need to visit the restroom. Please wait for me." Xu Qi'an stood up and left the hall.

The little eunuch waiting outside saw him come out and immediately followed, but stopped when he realised Xu Qi'an was heading towards the latrine, deciding not to continue.

In the latrine, Xu Qi'an took out the small jade mirror and checked the latest message.

【SIX: Daoist Jinlian, could you block the others? I have something to say to Number Three.】

\*Why is Hengyuan looking for me...\*

The members of the Heaven and Earth Society had mixed reactions upon seeing Six's message. After the previous transmissions, some had already guessed that Number Three was the cousin of the late Xu Qi'an in Yunzhou.

Perhaps only Number Five was calm and clear-headed, without much "distraction."

Number Four thought: That Xu Qi'an, who recently died in Yunzhou, just passed away, and now Hengyuan wants to "talk privately" with Number Three. It seems he too has guessed Number Three's true identity.

Number Two, Li Miaozen, felt a pang of sadness. They all believed Number Three was Xu Qi'an's cousin, but in truth, Number Three was Xu Qi'an himself.

And he had died in Yunzhou.

The Heaven and Earth Society no longer had a Number Three.

Number One observed silently, not commenting. Number Five didn't think much of it, glancing at the message before putting the Earth Book fragment aside.

【NINE: Okay.】

Li Miaozen was momentarily surprised but then understood. Daoist Jinlian was probably going to explain the situation to Number Six in private.

In the Heaven and Earth Society, Daoist Jinlian was the only one who knew everyone's identities.

Xu Qi'an waited a few seconds, then saw the small jade mirror display Hengyuan's message:

【SIX: Three, I wish to see Sir Xu one last time.】

\*You could have just seen him, so why message me... Ah, Hengyuan still doesn't know I've been revived...\* Xu Qi'an carefully replied:

【He has already been revived. If you wish to see him, you can find him at the Nightwatchers' office.】

There was a long silence on the other side before three words finally appeared: 【Is that true?】

In just three words, Xu Qi'an could feel Hengyuan's overwhelming excitement and disbelief. It took him so long just to type out those three words.

【Yep.】

Xu Qi'an's reply was just as brief and firm.

【No wonder you wouldn't see me. I was even somewhat resentful earlier—what a sin, what a sin. Sir Xu is a good man, and good deeds are rewarded. Amitabha, I am overjoyed, overjoyed.】

Xu Qi'an then concisely explained the process of his "cousin's" revival to Master Hengyuan.

【Master, I do not wish for my identity to be revealed. I hope that when we meet in the future, we can simply smile in recognition.】

【The humble monk understands.】

Hmm, you can smile at Xu Erlang. Sorry, Master, I had no choice before, but now I want to avoid another social death.

After putting away the Earth Book fragment, Xu Qi'an returned to the hall. Biaobiao complained, "That took so long."

"I was pondering the case. My thoughts became absorbed." Xu Qi'an casually explained, then asked, "Your Highness, I need to go inspect the remains of Consort Fu. Would you like to come?"

Biaobiao immediately stood up. "Yes!"

...

Consort Fu's body was stored in the ice cellar of the Imperial Palace. Judging by Emperor Yuanjing's attitude, it would be difficult for Consort Fu to be laid to rest until the case was thoroughly investigated.

Xu Qi'an, holding the Gold Token, arrived at the ice cellar under the guidance of Biaobiao and the little eunuch. The eunuch on duty led them inside.

In the cold ice cellar, Consort Fu lay quietly on a wooden slab, covered by a white cloth.

Biaobiao shivered slightly, tightening her fox fur cloak.

"Your Highness, why don't you wait outside?" Xu Qi'an suggested, concerned both that she might catch a cold and that Biaobiao might not have seen a corpse before.

Biaobiao stubbornly shook her head. "I also want to be involved and do something for my brother, the Crown Prince."

Xu Qi'an instructed the young eunuch to uncover the white cloth. Then, taking advantage of the fact that no one was paying attention, he suddenly grasped the princess's soft hand, infusing it with his warm Qi.

Biaobiao's delicate body stiffened, instinctively trying to pull her hand away as if she had been stung by a scorpion.

But that rough, warm hand held her firmly, like an iron clamp. A shy emotion welled up in her heart—she, a dignified Second Princess, pure and chaste, had never been so disrespected by a man.

\*How could he do this...\* Biaobiao felt both embarrassed and angry, and a bit wronged.

The next moment, warmth flowed from her palm, spreading up her arm, warming her entire body, driving away the chill of the ice cellar.

She no longer felt cold, and even felt a lazy desire to stretch.

She heard the running dog's low voice by her ear: "Your Highness, the ice cellar is terribly cold. If you insist on staying, this is the only way I can help.

"Although investigating the case is important, it pales in comparison to your precious health."

\*He held my hand to keep me warm... Compared to my body, the case is unimportant...\* Biaobiao, who liked hearing sweet words, suddenly felt less angry, though she was still shy.

She sneakily glanced at the two eunuchs ahead, then lightly tutted before discreetly moving closer to Xu Qi'an, using the wide cloak to hide her held hand.

\*Damn, the princess's hand is so soft, so smooth, so tender...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

To charm a girl, you must take the initiative, be bold in your approach, and occasionally tease her. Over time, you'll leave a deep impression on her heart.

Of course, this only works on innocent girls. If the other party is like a high-mileage car with multiple spare tyres, this tactic won't be effective.

In that case, it's simpler—just crash a luxury sports car into her tail lights.

"Sir Xu, please look."

The young eunuch lifted the white cloth, quickly retreating to the side, avoiding looking at Consort Fu's body.

Xu Qi'an released Lin'an's delicate hand and approached the body, examining the ill-fated consort.

She was a beautiful woman. Despite the pallor that marred her face, her features were strikingly attractive. She wore a plain white garment that accentuated her curvaceous figure.

Xu Qi'an reached out to loosen Consort Fu's clothing but was stopped by the young eunuch, who shook his head in terror. "Sir Xu, you mustn't..."

\*As expected, this won't work... I even wanted to perform an autopsy...\* Xu Qi'an understood and turned to the eunuch guarding the ice cellar, saying:

"Bring me the autopsy report and the case file."

The eunuch left immediately, returning shortly with the documents, which he handed to Xu Qi'an.

\*No signs of rape... bruises on the wrists and arms, suggesting they were forcibly gripped... her clothes were disheveled at the time of death, indicating violent struggle... her hair was disordered, consistent with resisting violence...\*

\*Attempted rape followed by death from a fall...\* Xu Qi'an made a preliminary judgment.

As he continued reading, a subtle detail caught his attention:

She fell face up!

\*Hmm? Fell face up?\*

Typically, when someone jumps to their death, they face the ground as they leap. The dramatic backward jumps seen on television, facing the crowd, were actually uncommon.

Thus, a person who falls would typically land face down, back up.

Of course, if someone falls from a tall building, factors like air resistance and wind can cause their body to turn mid-fall.

But the pavilion from which Consort Fu fell, according to the case file, was only two and a half stories high. So, the position during the fall would likely be the same as at the moment of impact.

Could it have been the Crown Prince who pushed her?

\*This doesn't align with the judgment that Consort Fu, unwilling to be humiliated, jumped to her death... If the Crown Prince wanted to taste what his father had exclusive rights to, it wouldn't make sense for him to push her off the building. Although, it's possible he became violent out of shame and anger, or perhaps he was drunk.\*

Thinking along these lines, Xu Qi'an reached out once more toward Consort Fu's body.

"Lord Xu!" The little eunuch stopped him, warning, "You must not disturb Consort Fu's body."

She was the Emperor's woman. Even in death, her body was not something a subject can defile.

"Get lost!" Xu Qi'an kicked him aside. "I'm investigating on imperial orders. First, you won't let me touch this, then you won't let me touch that—cut it with the bullshit!"

Xu Qi'an prided himself on his basic manners, even in his choice of words.

The young eunuch, having been kicked, didn't dare make a sound.

Xu Qi'an lifted Consort Fu's neck, feeling the back of her head, then ran his hands down from her shoulders to her back, and finally to her hips. Her plump buttocks made it necessary for him to press and squeeze a few times to feel the bones.

According to the structure of the human body, if someone falls on their back, the first parts to hit the ground would be the head and shoulders, followed by the most protruding part—the buttocks.

Since she was the Emperor's woman, Xu Qi'an couldn't undress her to check if there was damage to the flesh, so he could only confirm it by touch.

"She did indeed fall on her back..." he concluded.

This ruled out the possibility that someone tampered with her body after death to stage the scene.

“What did you find?” Biaobiao immediately asked.

Xu Qi'an shared his findings and thoughts with Biaobiao, though it was also meant for the young eunuch who was overseeing him.

“So, Consort Fu didn't jump to her death on her own?” Biaobiao quickly grasped the key point.

\*Not too dense after all...\* Xu Qi'an thought admiringly. “Your Highness is exceptionally intelligent, a cut above the rest.”

Biaobiao beamed with happiness at his praise.

After leaving the ice cellar, Xu Qi'an washed his hands with the help of the eunuchs before departing with Lin'an.

“Your Highness, it's getting late. Let's stop here for today, and I'll return tomorrow to continue the investigation,” Xu Qi'an said, glancing at the sundial.

It was \*shen\* 1-\*ke\* (3:15 PM).

According to the regulations of the Great Feng Dynasty, after the Spring Festival, the end of the workday was in the middle of \*shen\*. After the Autumn Equinox, it was at the beginning of \*shen\*.

Although the Spring Festival had passed, the Spring Equinox had not yet arrived, so dismissal was still at the start of \*shen\*. Now, the workday had already ended a quarter-hour ago.

Since Emperor Yuanjing wasn't paying him overtime, Xu Qi'an decided to call it a day and waved goodbye to Lin'an.

...

At that moment, Emperor Yuanjing was sitting in his bedchamber, deeply engrossed in the Daoist scriptures in his hands.

Compared to the tedious memorials and the endless state affairs, the Daoist scripture in his hand, which contained the secret to immortality, was far more enticing and captivating to Emperor Yuanjing.

What is the most alluring thing in the world?

Power!

But the lifespan of a mortal is limited, no more than a few decades. Even if one holds great power and commands the four seas, what does it amount to in the end?

Ultimately, one still succumbs to time, turning into nothing more than a handful of yellow earth.

Only eternal life and unending youth are truly desirable, for they represent the ability to hold power forever.

Emperor Yuanjing put down the book, closed his eyes, and pondered the mysteries within it. He then picked up his ginseng tea, took a sip, and exhaled softly.

Seizing the moment, the Grand Eunuch reported, "Your Majesty, Xu Qi'an has left the palace."

Emperor Yuanjing thought for a moment before asking, "What did he do in the palace today?"

Having just appointed Xu Qi'an as the lead investigator, Emperor Yuanjing was quite interested in how this little Bronze Gong would conduct the investigation.

The Grand Eunuch immediately summoned the little eunuch and led him into the bedchamber.

The little eunuch kept his head down, bowing low.

Emperor Yuanjing, seated lazily, glanced at the young eunuch and asked lightly, "What did Xu Qi'an do? Has there been any progress in the case?"

The Grand Eunuch immediately prompted, "Tell His Majesty everything in detail."

#### Chapter 237. Seeing the Crown Prince

The little eunuch kept his head down and said, "Young Master Xu first went to Princess Lin'an's Shaoyin Courtyard. They talked for a long time behind the rock garden, and when they came out, Princess Lin'an's eyes were red, as if she had just cried..."

At this, Emperor Yuanjing frowned and interrupted, "What were they doing behind the rock garden?"

The Grand Eunuch glanced at Emperor Yuanjing's expression and realised that the Emperor was displeased. The princess and Xu Qi'an had gone to the secluded area behind the rock garden, and then the princess emerged with reddened eyes.

This was indeed suggestive.

"Speak truthfully," the Grand Eunuch glared.

"It was... because Princess Lin'an came out with a sword. As soon as Bronze Gong Xu saw her, he hid behind the rock garden. It was this servant who told Her Highness where Bronze Gong Xu was hiding," the little eunuch hurriedly explained, trembling and not daring to withhold anything.

The Grand Eunuch immediately looked at Emperor Yuanjing, seeing that the anger in his eyes had subsided. The Grand Eunuch breathed a sigh of relief and said, "Continue."

"Afterward, Sir Xu and the Princess went into the hall, and I was sent out. They spoke inside the hall for about half an hour. I don't know what they talked about," the little eunuch said, finally expressing his own grievances: "It's not that I neglected my duties, it's just... Sir Xu was too forceful."

After speaking, he carefully glanced at Emperor Yuanjing out of the corner of his eye.

To his disappointment, Emperor Yuanjing showed no expression. The little eunuch had no choice but to continue, "After that, Sir Xu took me and Princess Lin'an to see Consort Fu's body.

"During the process, Sir Xu wanted to touch the consort's body, and I tried my best to stop him, but I failed. I even got kicked by him."

As expected, the little eunuch clearly remembered that kick and was just waiting for this moment to give Xu Qi'an some trouble.

Sure enough, Emperor Yuanjing frowned.



The Grand Eunuch, who had been by the Emperor's side for decades, spoke on his behalf: "How did he examine her?"

"He just kept feeling around for a long time," the little eunuch answered.

He didn't dare exaggerate because if the Emperor became enraged, all it would take was someone to verify the details or question Xu Qi'an, and the lie would be exposed. The crime of deceiving the Emperor was not one the little eunuch dared to commit.

The Grand Eunuch asked, "And then?"

"Then... he left," the little eunuch said. "But Sir Xu did say that there's something suspicious about Consort Fu's death."

"Suspicious?" Emperor Yuanjing finally spoke again, straightening up slightly and leaning forward, staring at the little eunuch.

"Sir Xu said that a normal suicide by jumping would have the person landing face-down, not on their back. But Consort Fu was indeed found lying on her back. It's very likely that she was pushed."

The little eunuch faithfully repeated Xu Qi'an's analysis to Emperor Yuanjing.

\*Pushed to her death...\* Emperor Yuanjing squinted, gazing up at the ceiling as he pondered for a long time before saying, "You may go."

The little eunuch bowed and left.

The Grand Eunuch smiled obsequiously and said, "This Xu Qi'an truly lives up to his reputation. The three departments investigated for several days with no progress, but as soon as he took over, he immediately found a clue. The case might be solved soon."

Emperor Yuanjing snorted coldly, "It's not that the Three Departments don't know how to handle a case; they just don't want to. However, Xu Qi'an does have some ability."

He was satisfied, nonetheless.

After a pause, Emperor Yuanjing said, "Issue our decree. Have the Cabinet draft an edict to resume the process of ennobling Xu Qi'an."

The Grand Eunuch received the order and exited the bedchamber. Instead of going directly to the Cabinet, he first found the little eunuch who had been supervising Xu Qi'an's investigation and slapped him hard across the face.

"Godfather?"

The little eunuch covered his face, feeling aggrieved.

"At a time like this, you're still playing tricks on me? Do you think His Majesty didn't see through it? Do you realise you just walked through the gates of death?" The Grand Eunuch scolded harshly, "The matter of Consort Fu is something His Majesty is already troubled by. You dare to play games in front of him now? The only reason you're not dead is because you're lucky."

"When I tell you to supervise Xu Qi'an, you do so properly. Don't add any of your own thoughts or biases. The people he interacts with and the things he does in the inner palace involve consorts,

princesses, and princes. You cannot afford to let your personal views or feelings affect your duties, or you'll be meddling in the affairs of the royal family."

What Xu Qi'an did or didn't do would be judged by the Emperor himself. If the little eunuch added his own spin, it would be akin to interfering in the affairs of the Emperor's household.

The little eunuch bowed his head, trembling, "I understand, Father."

The Grand Eunuch snorted, "Sir Xu kicked you out for your own good. If you had overheard something you shouldn't have, the day the case is solved would be the day you lose your head."

The little eunuch was stunned at first, but after a few seconds, he understood. His face turned pale, and cold sweat broke out on his back.

His grudge against Xu Qi'an for that kick dissipated instantly.

...

Dusk.

Xu Qi'an rode his beloved mare, which trotted along with a rhythmic "da da da." He squinted against the orange sunlight, humming a tune:

"Walk the path of men; carry the flag against the wind. Don't seek pleasure, don't be greedy, just be a good official, and the people will remember you..."

His mare trotted into the alley leading to the Jiaofangsi.

Upon reaching the alley's entrance, Xu Qi'an dismounted and tossed the reins to a blue-robed servant standing there, along with a piece of broken silver.

The gate to Reflecting Plum Pavilion was tightly shut, as if it was closed for business.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the fading light in the west and thought to himself, "At this hour, the Jiaofangsi should be open."

"Bang, bang, bang..."

He knocked heavily on the gate of Reflecting Plum Pavilion. After a while, the gate opened slightly, and a blue-robed servant inside said, "Reflecting Plum Pavilion is not receiving guests. Sir, please visit another pavilion..."

When the gate fully opened and the servant saw Xu Qi'an, he froze, stammering, "You... you are..."

"I'm your lady's esteemed guest," Xu Qi'an raised an eyebrow.

"A ghost!"

The servant shrieked and tried to run, his legs moving rapidly but getting nowhere as Xu Qi'an grabbed him by the collar.

"Why are you shouting? I'm still alive," Xu Qi'an said, giving him two light but resounding slaps on the face. "Isn't my hand warm?"

Feeling the hot sting on his face, the servant realised Xu Qi'an was indeed alive, though he was puzzled by the changes in his appearance and the fur hat he was wearing.

"You've finally returned! Lady Fuxiang has been washing her face with tears every day, growing thinner and more sorrowful," the servant quickly tried to earn favor for his mistress.

Though curious about Xu Qi'an's apparent resurrection, he didn't dare ask.

"I'll go inform her right away that you've returned."

"Just tell her there's a guest and see if she'll come out to accompany me," Xu Qi'an instructed.

The servant quickly went deeper into the courtyard, standing outside Fuxiang's bedroom and calling out, "Lady, a guest has arrived. Will you come out to accompany him?"

There was no response from Fuxiang. Instead, a maid's scolding voice came from inside, "The lady is unwell and won't be accompanying guests. Who told you to open the door? Do you want to lose your hands?"

Xu Qi'an coughed, "So Lady Fuxiang isn't receiving guests? In that case, I'll be on my way."

The room suddenly fell silent, then Fuxiang's trembling voice called out, "Dear Xu?"

His voice had changed significantly, so Fuxiang didn't dare to be sure.

Xu Qi'an chuckled, "It's me."

There was a loud crash inside, as if something had been knocked over, followed by the maid's startled exclamation, "My lady, slow down..."

The next moment, the door flew open. Fuxiang, dressed in a white long dress, her snow-white feet bare, and her jet-black hair cascading loosely, rushed out, shoving the door aside.

One stood under the eaves, the other in the courtyard, the scene momentarily frozen.

Xu Qi'an sighed, "It's cold out here. Let's go inside."

Fuxiang let out a wail and threw herself into his arms, crying bitterly.

...

"So it was just like that, not only did I not die, I had great fortune from the hardship, and benefited quite a lot."

Xu Qi'an sat at the table, drinking the fine wine from the Jiaofangsi as he explained the details of his resurrection to Fuxiang.

Fuxiang, sitting on the edge of the bed, had her skirt slightly parted, revealing a long, pale leg with a bruise on her calf. A maid was carefully applying ointment to the bruise.

She had hurt herself earlier when she ran too quickly.

Fuxiang's emotions were complicated at the moment, filled with the joy of regaining what was lost, yet unable to conceal her lingering sadness and unease. There was still an emptiness in her heart.

"Every time I think about your death, my heart still feels empty," she murmured.

"Don't worry, soon it'll feel very full."

By the time the sun had fully set, a group of maids entered, bringing with them a table full of exquisite dishes—flying creatures, swimming creatures, and crawling creatures alike.

The two of them sat at the table, drinking wine, and their conversation meandered without a fixed topic.

"In fact, many scholars in the capital greatly admire you," Fuxiang said. "Yesterday, a maid overheard from some guests at the Jiaofangsi that when they heard of your death, those scholars were deeply regretful, saying that the fall of Xu Ningyan was the fall of the future of the Great Feng poetry scene."

"Come to think of it, when I was facing thousands of rebels that day, fighting alone until I was exhausted, I did indeed compose a poem," Xu Qi'an said, holding his wine cup.

Fuxiang's eyes sparkled with delight, and her face lit up with a radiant smile, filled with anticipation. "I would love to hear it," she said eagerly.

\*I always get a bit embarrassed plagiarising others... I am one right and proper guy...\* Xu Qi'an's heart said, but when it came time to show off he was going to put on a show.

He paused for a few seconds, adopting a solemn demeanor, and then recited:

“\*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!\*"

Fuxiang gazed at him in a daze, her beautiful eyes shimmering with water, both enchanting and dazed.

As she savoured the incomplete poem, images of him standing against thousands of rebels, ready to die, flashed through her mind.

She became even more infatuated with this man, unable to extricate herself.

"Don't just sit there daydreaming. There's a reason I shared that with you," Xu Qi'an tapped the table with his finger.

"A reason?" Fuxiang blinked, looking at him in confusion.

"Help me spread the word. The Jiaofangsi is the perfect place to propagate such glorious deeds."

How could Inspector Zhang not have included his poem in the report to the court? It was almost negligent. The entire capital's officialdom and literary circles must be anxiously waiting to read his masterpiece.

"...Oh."

After dinner, the maids prepared hot water, intending to help Xu Qi'an bathe.

"You may go," Xu Qi'an dismissed the maids, leaving Fuxiang alone in the room with him.

Once Fuxiang had stepped into the bath, draped in a thin veil, Xu Qi'an took off his fur hat.

A completely bald head was revealed.

"Pfft..."

Fuxiang couldn't help herself and burst into laughter, leaning against the edge of the tub, her laughter causing her body to shake.

\*What's so funny? Even though I'm bald, I've also gotten stronger...\* Xu Qi'an glared at her.

It would probably take at least half a year for his hair to grow back.

...

Fuxiang's chest wasn't just a chest; when Xu Qi'an rested his head on it, it became a pillow. And if he turned over, it could be called a face wash.

The two of them lay in bed after the bath, chatting. Fuxiang felt a bit stifled and short of breath, so she pushed away the large, bald head resting on her chest with a pout.

"Puff!"

Xu Qi'an flicked a spark of Qi, extinguishing the candle.

The next day, after being dressed by the Oiran, Xu Qi'an said his farewells to the reluctant but heavily sleep-deprived Fuxiang.

The maids of Reflecting Plum Pavilion watched as Xu Qi'an's figure disappeared out the courtyard gate, whispering among themselves:

"Master Xu is incredible. I think the bed in Madam's room needs to be replaced."

"Yes, it creaks with every movement, almost falling apart. Poor Madam."

"Hurry and heat some water; Madam needs a bath. Also, prepare some loquat syrup; her voice is hoarse."

Leaving Reflecting Plum Pavilion, Xu Qi'an was invigorated by the cold spring air that met him. He walked toward the stables.

Suddenly, he stepped on something hard. Looking down, he saw it was a pouch.

\*Have I reached the Refining Spirit realm and gained the power to find purses...\* Xu Qi'an thought with some delight, naturally bending down to pick it up and planning to pocket it.

He suddenly froze.

This pouch was identical to the one hanging from his waist, with fine stitching and an embroidered pine tree, made by Lingyue, his little sister.

Second Uncle?

Just as the thought occurred, Xu Qi'an saw a young man in scholar's robes rushing from the direction of the stables. The young man was handsome, with bright eyes, white teeth, and well-defined features—clearly inheriting his mother's excellent genes.

\*This I did not expect...\* Xu Qi'an mused.

The handsome young man's eyes searched the ground until they landed on Xu Qi'an. Then, he froze.

Xu Qi'an's lips twitched into a smile as he raised his hand in greeting. "Good morning."

...Xu Erlang looked at him, his lips moving slightly. "Good... morning...."

The two brothers stood in awkward silence, gazing at each other. After a moment, Xu Qi'an broke the ice, stepping forward to return the pouch to Erlang:

"Be more careful next time. Fortunately I was the one who found it."

Xu Erlang took it calmly, nodding. "Thank you, big brother."

The two brothers found themselves at a loss for words again, so they walked side by side toward the stables, leading their horses out and riding slowly out of the Jiaofangsi.

The sun had just risen, and apart from the vendors and peddlers, there were few people on the streets.

"Yesterday, I was with my classmates...."

"Yesterday, I was with my colleagues...."

The brothers spoke in unison.

Xu Qi'an glanced back at the Jiaofangsi alley, then at his younger brother. "Classmates, huh?"

Xu Xinnian stared straight ahead, his tone indifferent. "Colleagues, huh?"

And just like that, the brothers had nothing to say again.

Xu Qi'an remembered when he had returned home from prison, and Xu Xinnian had socially died because of the "the Great Feng forever will be night that never ends" incident, faking unconsciousness out of shame.

Now, though, even when caught red-handed at the Jiaofangsi, he didn't bat an eyelid.

\*It wasn't just me who grew; Erlang's skin has thickened a lot too... Maybe he's just gotten used to dying in front of me so many times...\* Xu Qi'an thought as he saw a vendor selling green oranges by the roadside. He quickly reined in his horse. "Wait a moment."

Xu Xinnian followed suit, reining in his horse and looking over curiously.

Xu Qi'an bought a pound of green oranges and called Xu Erlang off his horse. As they peeled the oranges and rubbed the juice on their clothes, Xu Qi'an explained:

"The Jiaofangsi girls wear too much makeup. Use the juice of the green oranges to mask the scent; even the most sensitive woman won't be able to detect it."

Xu Erlang, while deftly applying the orange juice to his clothes, took the opportunity to unleash his sharp tongue, saying sarcastically:

"You really missed your calling by not becoming a scholar, big brother."

Xu Qi'an glanced at him. "Second Uncle taught me this trick."

Xu Xinnian acted as though he hadn't said anything, lowering his head to carefully rub the orange juice into his clothes.

Once finished, Xu Qi'an handed the green oranges to Xu Xinnian. "I'm heading to the palace to investigate a case. You can take these back home."

Xu Erlang frowned. "Investigating a case? What are you getting involved in now?"

"The case of Consort Fu's death. The emperor threw it at me," Xu Qi'an explained.

"Why are you meddling in that nonsense?"

The Cloud Deer Academy had its own information network, and no event in the capital could escape its notice.

"I couldn't refuse."

Xu Xinnian sneered, "Why not have Father give you a good knock on the head? Then you could use injury as an excuse to get out of it. Besides, this case is bound to be difficult to solve."

\*Looks like Erlang is well-suited for a career in officialdom; he's certainly scheming enough...\* Xu Qi'an thought with a smile. "Actually, palace cases are the easiest to solve."

Because the palace was filled with masters, and as the lair of Emperor Yuanjing, those flowery and flashy external systems couldn't intervene. The case of Consort Fu was probably the most "normal" case he has handled since arriving in this world.

Xu Xinnian nodded, looking disdainfully at the green oranges, "These are sour and bitter, no one at home would eat them."

"We can't let them go to waste; give them to Lingyin."

"Good idea."

...

The High Court.

At the grand entrance of the High Court, Xu Qi'an sat on horseback and glanced at the three gilded characters "The High Court."

The High Court was responsible for handling criminal cases and trials, equivalent to the Supreme People's Court in Xu Qi'an's previous life. Along with the Censorate and the Ministry of Law, it was one of the Three Judicial Offices, the three departments.

In major cases, the Emperor would often have the Three Departments jointly investigate alongside the Nightwatchers. This showed just how powerful Wei Yuan, who simultaneously oversaw the Nightwatchers and the Censorate, really was.

Emperor Yuanjing used only him to balance the civil and military officials.

Likewise, it showed how lucky Xu Qi'an is. He just happened to join the Nightwatchers and just happened to gain Wei Yuan's favour. From a small fast bailiff in Changle County, he had become a person who could walk sideways in the capital.

"Quickly go find the Chief Justice and have him come out to see me," Xu Qi'an flashed his gold token and said to the bailiff on duty at the entrance.

"If he doesn't come out, I will go to the palace and complain to His Majesty, saying that he is deliberately making things difficult and obstructing the investigation."

The bailiff hurried inside.

A quarter of an hour later, the Chief Justice, accompanied by two vice ministers and several High Court officials, came out to meet him.

"Sir Xu, apologies for not coming out to greet you sooner," the Chief Justice said with a smile.

Xu Qi'an dismounted, warmly stepping forward to meet him, "Ah, how could I trouble Minister Pei to come out personally? I'm ashamed, truly ashamed."

Xu Qi'an had intentionally made the Chief Justice come out to greet him to embarrass him. For one of the nine chief ministers to personally come out to greet a lowly Bronze Gong was a huge loss of face... The two had a history, and he couldn't miss the opportunity to make things difficult.

"It was necessary, necessary."

The Chief Justice led Xu Qi'an inside, saying, "Sir Xu's return is timely. The case of Consort Fu is yours alone. However, I must warn Sir Xu that this case is dangerous, so be careful not to get too deeply involved."

This was said with a tone of schadenfreude.

The case of Consort Fu—if solved—would offend the Crown Prince's Clique. If unsolved, it would offend Emperor Yuanjing.

\*At least I will get a viscount title out of it, so offending the old emperor is no big deal...\* Xu Qi'an replied cheerfully:

"No matter, no matter. Before I get too deeply involved, I'll make sure to drag down those old bats who get in my way. After all, I have the gold token with the power to execute first and report later; no reason not to use it."

The Chief Justice squinted, "Sir Xu, you do have a way with words.

"Is Sir Xu here for the Crown Prince?"

"Indeed."

...

Xu Qi'an met the Crown Prince in the "cell", which was actually a clean and tidy room. It wasn't luxurious, but it had all the necessary furnishings.

The Crown Prince was confined in this room, unable to leave until the case was resolved.

\*As expected of the Crown Prince, even prison is different for him...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

Once the officer left and closed the door, Xu Qi'an cupped his hands and said, "Your humble servant Xu Qi'an greets Your Highness."

"You're here to interrogate me, right? Father has appointed you to preside over this case?" The Crown Prince sat at the table, scrutinising Xu Qi'an.

"The Three Departments all shirked responsibility and didn't want to get involved, so they found me, this unkillable rascal. After all, I've already offended enough people." Xu Qi'an shrugged, sat down at the table, and poured himself a cup of water.

All these actions were noted by the Crown Prince.

"Please, Your Highness, describe in detail what happened that day."



The Crown Prince nodded slightly, thought for a moment, and then slowly said, "That day, I had lunch at my mother's residence. The snow had not yet melted, and I was returning to the Eastern Palace with my guards when I encountered a maid from Consort Fu's quarters. The maid said that Consort Fu had invited me for a chat.

"So, I followed her to Qingfeng Palace, which is Consort Fu's residence. Upon entering, the maid led me upstairs, asking me to wait in the outer hall, saying that Consort Fu was changing clothes.

"I had drunk too much wine at that time and was very thirsty, so I drank some tea on the table to quench my thirst. Somehow, I then felt dizzy and fell asleep.

"Later, I was awakened by a scream, only to find that Consort Fu had fallen to her death, and I had become the prime suspect."

Xu Qi'an asked expressionlessly, "There were no maids in the hall at that time?"

"No, there weren't in the outer hall. As for inside, I don't know."

"And that maid?"

"She disappeared."

\*Disappeared, huh...\* Xu Qi'an's eyes flashed with a sharp light. He leaned forward on the table, staring intently at the Crown Prince, "How does Your Highness know the maid disappeared?"

For a moment, the Crown Prince was actually intimidated by the fierce aura of this small Bronze Gong.

"Although I am confined here, I have my ways of gathering information," the Crown Prince replied coldly, maintaining a stern expression.

He was annoyed at himself for being momentarily daunted.

Judging by the Crown Prince's calm demeanour when he first saw him, Xu Qi'an believed his words.

"Does Consort Fu usually have any interaction with Your Highness?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Of course not."

The Crown Prince flatly denied it. As the heir apparent, he couldn't and shouldn't have any private interactions with the Emperor's concubines.

"Then why did you, without a second thought, go to meet Consort Fu when she sent someone to invite you?" Xu Qi'an struck right at the heart of the matter.

"I... had drunk too much at the time and wasn't thinking clearly," the Crown Prince replied, his expression slightly uneasy.

\*Pah! He just couldn't resist her allure.\*

As a man, Xu Qi'an understood the Crown Prince's mindset quite well. Consort Fu was a beautiful and elegant woman, and it was likely that the Crown Prince had harboured thoughts about her in the past.

On that day, he had coincidentally drunk a wine that was known to enhance vitality and virility. Anyone who has experienced a slight intoxication knows how it can make a person feel emboldened, daring to do things they normally wouldn't.

Things one wouldn't dare to think about suddenly seem possible; words that would normally remain unspoken slip out without hesitation.

And when Consort Fu extended her invitation—or rather, didn't even need to—his thoughts led him there...

"It sounds like someone set a trap for Your Highness," Xu Qi'an analysed.

"Naturally, someone is framing me. Sir Xu thinks so too, right?" The Crown Prince sighed in relief.

"No, no, no. Investigations can't be so subjective. I'm merely presenting one possibility. There's also another possibility," Xu Qi'an said, leaning on the table, inching closer to the Crown Prince, and speaking slowly, word by word:

"That day, after drinking too much, Your Highness found your thoughts wandering and couldn't help but think of Consort Fu, whom you had long coveted. Knowing that His Majesty is engrossed in Daoist practices and disinterested in women, Your Highness's desire flared up, leading you to turn towards Qingfeng Hall with the intention of defiling Consort Fu.

"However, Consort Fu was steadfast and refused to yield, resisting until the end. During the struggle, you accidentally pushed her off the pavilion, causing her to fall to her death. Afterward, you secretly had a maid eliminated to fabricate the story that you were being framed."

"Nonsense!"

The Crown Prince slammed the table, rising in fury. "Xu Qi'an, how dare you slander me! How dare you falsely accuse me!"

"Please, calm down, Your Highness. This is just a hypothesis from your servant. The truth is yet to be determined," Xu Qi'an responded with a beaming smile, placating the Crown Prince.

\*Tsk, the Crown Prince's self-control isn't deep enough. Is he too concerned about his position? How can he hope to be emperor with such a disposition?\*

Neither the Crown Prince nor Princess Lin'an were particularly brilliant. Xu Qi'an grew increasingly suspicious that Emperor Yuanjing had ulterior motives in appointing his eldest son, born of a concubine, as the Crown Prince.

After the Crown Prince calmed down, Xu Qi'an asked, "Have any arcanists from the Sitianjian examined Your Highness?"

"This matter involves me, Consort Fu, and the very foundation of the Great Feng. Do you think Father would trust the arcanists of the Sitianjian?" The Crown Prince retorted with a cold sneer.

Xu Qi'an nodded. After spending so much time in the capital, he could discern some of the underlying dynamics.

Although the Sitianjian was dependent on the royal family and the dynasty's fortune—evident from how Chu Caiwei needed the approval of the people in the capital to advance to the sixth rank—the Jianzheng of the first rank was simply too powerful. Thus, the Sitianjian was not purely subservient, functioning more like a partner with the Feng dynasty.

When it comes to matters involving the heir apparent, Emperor Yuanjing may not fully trust the Sitianjian. Moreover, the Sitianjian might be reluctant to get involved in such a messy situation.

"I still need to examine Your Highness's body. I hope Your Highness will cooperate."

Xu Qi'an took hold of the Crown Prince's hand, inspecting his wrist, arm, and then his neck... There were no scratches or claw marks.

"I will uncover the truth as quickly as possible. If Your Highness is innocent, I will naturally restore your name," Xu Qi'an said as he stood and cupped his hands in salute.

"Wait!"

The Crown Prince called out, his voice serious, "Sir Xu, have you become too close with Lin'an?"

Chapter 238. The Scene of the Crime

\*What the hell do you mean?\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself, his expression darkening slightly.

In relationships between men and women, both parties were usually aware of any romantic inclinations, even if they were slow to realise it. Eventually, even the most oblivious would catch on.

Biaobiao was a bit naive when it came to matters of the heart. First, she lacked experience, and second, she instinctively avoided confronting her own feelings.

So, she might not have realised that she had developed feelings for this little Bronze Gong.

But would Xu Qi'an not know?

Impossible!

Whether in his past life or this one, Xu Qi'an had always been a man rich in romantic experiences. The occasional trust and closeness shown by Biaobiao, a young lady in the prime of her youth, were clear signals to him:

This girl likes me.

The Crown Prince was also a man, so there was no point in Xu Qi'an denying it in front of him.

"What does Your Highness think?" Xu Qi'an asked in return.

"I heard that Father originally intended to grant you the title of Viscount of Changle County, but upon learning of your revival, he cancelled it?" the Crown Prince said.

“His Majesty promised me that if I thoroughly investigate Consort Fu’s case, a title is just around the corner,” Xu Qi'an replied.

The Crown Prince pondered, “A viscount’s position is still somewhat low. If you can clear my name, I can help elevate you further. You must know that in some matters, a viscount isn’t enough.”

Xu Qi'an chuckled, “Your Highness, why not just reward me with a thousand taels of gold? That would be more practical than making empty promises.”

The Crown Prince raised an eyebrow, “You don’t trust me?”

“It’s not that I don’t trust you, Your Highness, but what you can offer me, Duke Wei can also provide. What you cannot offer, Duke Wei can still give me.”

“Xu Qi'an, Wei Yuan is a solitary minister. Look through the history books, which solitary minister ever met a good end?” the Crown Prince said sternly.

Xu Qi'an bowed respectfully and left the room.

.....

The Xu Manor.

“Where’s Big Bwother? Why’s he missing again?” Xu Lingyin asked, her mouth full with a pork bun as she looked around.

“Your big brother isn’t here,” Auntie replied as she put a small cloth bag around her youngest daughter’s neck.

“If Big Bwother isn’t here, I’m not going. I want Big Bwother,” Xu Lingyin said angrily.

“Don’t try to pull that trick on me. You’re just looking for an excuse to skip school,” Auntie said, poking Little Pea’s forehead.

Little pea was shocked. She had thought long and hard about this plan, only for her mother to see through it instantly.

\*Mummy’s so smart., so why does Big Bwother always make her so mad?\*

“Mummy, how about I stay home and study with Second Brother?” Xu Lingyin said sweetly.

“You’re the ugliest and think the prettiest,” Auntie scolded. “Your second brother is about to take the spring imperial exams. He doesn’t have time to look after a silly child like you.”

“What are the spring imperial exams?”

“They’re the civil service exams.”

“What are the civil service exams?”

“They’re tests.”

“What are tests?”

“Xu Lingyin, are you trying to drive me crazy?” Auntie shouted, exasperated.

At this moment, Xu Erlang walked into the house with a bag of green tangerines. He saw his mother scolding his sister but didn’t pay much attention. He handed the tangerines to his sister, saying, “Lingyin, take these to school to eat.”

Xu Lingyin happily accepted them, but her face scrunched up when she saw they were green tangerines. She frowned and said, “Second Brother, these tangerines don’t taste good.”

Xu Erlang was surprised, “Have you eaten them before?”

Auntie explained, “Your father bought these green tangerines last time.”

Xu Erlang looked deeply at Auntie and said, “Mum...”

Auntie looked at him puzzled, “If you have something to say, just say it. Don’t beat around the bush.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Xu Erlang said casually. “I saw big brother give Dad fifty taels of silver yesterday. You should take it before he squanders it away.”

Auntie’s eyebrows shot up, “That Xu Ningyan, how infuriating.”

In truth, Xu Erlang was lying to Auntie. He said it to ensure his mother would drain their father’s private funds. To appease his wife, his father would grit his teeth and hand over his private savings, leaving him unable to squander money elsewhere.

Then, for a long time, their annoying big brother would be on Auntie’s bad side.

Killing two birds with one stone, perfect!

Satisfied, Xu Erlang went back to his study to continue his reading.

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The Imperial Palace.

Holding his token, Xu Qi'an made his way unimpeded into the palace and to Shaoyin Courtyard to meet Biaobiao for the investigation.

Today, Princess Lin'an was wearing a bright red palace dress. The colour was the same as yesterday, but the style was different. She happily skipped over, her oval face beaming with a sweet smile, her peach blossom eyes filled with a radiant charm.

After meeting Lin'an, Xu Qi'an realised that a seductive beauty need not have a sharp, pointed chin. A woman with an oval face can also be alluring and captivating.

It's a pity that the era limited Lin'an's potential. Otherwise, with a head of wavy curls, denim shorts, and a halter top, she would undoubtedly be a sultry goddess.

She would fit right in at a nightclub.

Biaobiao skipped over and twirled lightly, her skirt fluttering. She was deliberately showing off her beauty to Xu Qi'an, perhaps without even realising it.

Xu Qi'an wondered, "Why do you always wear red dresses?"

As soon as he spoke, Biaobiao's face fell.

"Hmph, you running dog, didn't you say I look especially beautiful in dresses?" Lin'an huffed.

Xu Qi'an suddenly covered his eyes and cried out in pain.

"What's wrong?" Biaobiao asked with concern.

"Your Highness is just too beautiful, radiant, blinding to my eyes," Xu Qi'an exclaimed.

Biaobiao's frown turned into a smile. "Xu Ningyan's words are so sweet, so interesting."

"Your Highness, I'm planning to visit Qingfeng Palace today," Xu Qi'an said.

Lin'an nodded and replied sweetly, "We're waiting for someone."

She had a proud look in her eyes, her chin raised, revealing her long, white neck.

Xu Qi'an suddenly felt uneasy. No way, no way, it couldn't be what I think, could it?

In just a few minutes, Princess Huaqing arrived, wearing a white palace dress, looking cool and absolutely stunning, her every movement exuding charm.

Xu Qi'an thought to himself, "..."

Princess Lin'an put her hands on her hips, mimicking a proud little hen, and said, "Huaqing insisted on joining our master and servant pair to see the investigation. I decided to fulfill her wish. Running... Xu Ningyan, what do you think?"

She emphasised the words "master and servant" as if declaring ownership over someone.

Xu Qi'an internally shouted, \*I think this is a damned disaster!\*

\*When did I become your servant...\* He smiled and said, "Your servant has no objections to anything."

Princess Huaqing's clear eyes glanced over, and she said lightly, "Then I'll accept Sir Xu's kindness."

\*Princess, it's not what you think. Lin'an and I are clean. I'm still loyal to you.\* Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched.

He hadn't expected Huaqing to get involved in Consort Fu's case, but on second thought, it seemed inevitable.

First, Huaqing was very interested in investigating and solving cases, but as a noble and distinguished princess, she previously had no reason nor environment to get involved.

During the Sangpo case, Huaqing often summoned Xu Qi'an to the palace to inquire about the case details and even accompanied him in poring over historical records to find clues.

Now that such a major case had occurred in the palace, it was understandable that Huaqing was paying attention, and had developed a strong interest.

Previously, the investigation was led by the Three Departments, so Huaiqing couldn't intervene. But now that Xu Qi'an was the chief investigator, Huaiqing naturally came along. Of course, Xu Qi'an suspected that this also involved some mischief by Biaobiao.

For example, running to Huaiqing and boasting: "My Running Dog is back, and the Running Dog listens to me the most..." and so on, showing off in every way possible.

Xu Qi'an, a servant of three surnames, felt very embarrassed. So on the way to the Qingfeng Palace, he quietly followed behind the two princesses, staying silent to reduce his presence.

\*Damn, if Biaobiao keeps this up, one day I'll end up splitting because of my two-timing and hurt myself...\*

On the way, he asked the on-duty guards to find the little eunuch from the previous day.

The little eunuch's attitude had greatly changed. After greeting Huaiqing and Lin'an with respect, he also bowed to Xu Qi'an: "Sir Xu, I hope you won't hold any grudge for my previous offenses. I deeply appreciate the kindness you showed me yesterday."

Xu Qi'an was taken aback, thinking, \*What kindness did I show you? What are you talking about?\*

But he didn't show any emotion, simply nodding in acknowledgment.

The group proceeded toward Qingfeng Palace, with the two princesses leading the way. One in white and the other in red, both were exceptionally stunning beauties. Their beauty wasn't just in their looks and aura; their figures were also a crucial part of their charm.

\*Lin'an's hips aren't as large as Huaiqing's...\*

\*Her legs aren't as long as Huaiqing's, and Huaiqing is half a head taller than Lin'an...\*

\*Ah, Biaobiao, you can't compare with your sister in anything. What a useless girl.\*

\*Huaiqing indeed lives up to my image of a cold goddess in the workplace, making people feel a strong desire to conquer her, wanting to make her cry...\*

For the first time, Xu Qi'an could quietly appreciate the two sisters' beauty. As he admired them, he realised that in terms of fullness of hip shape, Huaiqing seemed to have an edge.

However, the amplitude of her swaying waist and the fluttering of her skirt were more exaggerated in Lin'an. This indicated that Biaobiao was better at swaying her hips than Huaiqing.

Huaiqing had cultivation, and under her loose palace attire, she probably had a slender waist and a sexy toned abdomen. But Biaobiao's serpentine waist seemed boneless, swaying back and forth, back and forth.

She was an inherently charming woman, not deliberately coquettish, but her occasional unconscious movements and the subtle allure of certain parts of her body were much more enticing than those of women who were well-versed in seduction techniques.

For instance, her eyes, full of springtime charm, always carried a hint of languor when looking at others. Or, as in the current moment, her soft, flexible serpentine waist and the swaying allure of her buttocks.

When Xu Qi'an first met her, he thought she perfectly fit the image of a little nightclub queen. It wasn't a rash judgment but one based on his extensive experience.

Soon, the group arrived at Qingfeng Palace.

Qingfeng Palace had been cordoned off by palace guards, with the maids and eunuchs confined to the courtyard.

Neither the influence of Princess Lin'an nor Princess Huaiking worked here. It was only when Xu Qi'an showed his gold token and revealed his identity that the guards let them in, respectfully guiding them inside.

The so-called Qingfeng Palace was actually a two-tiered palace courtyard. The front courtyard housed low-ranking maids and eunuchs, while the back courtyard was for the close confidants of Consort Fu.

The main hall was a two-story pavilion with flying eaves and interlocking brackets, grand and magnificent.

The guardrail on the viewing platform on the second floor was broken, likely where Consort Fu fell to her death.

Xu Qi'an estimated the height, roughly six to seven meters. From such a height, falling would depend on whether the King of Hell wanted to take you.

If Consort Fu fell with the back of her head hitting the ground, it could be explained as the King of Hell coveting her beauty and summoning her down to accompany him, leaving no one able to save her.

The main hall was also sealed off, with four guards standing at the door to protect the scene.

"Where exactly did Consort Fu fall?" Xu Qi'an asked the head guard.

The head guard pointed to where Lin'an was standing, "Consort Fu fell right there."

Biaobiao, like a nimble, startled rabbit, quickly hopped away.

Xu Qi'an stood at the spot where Consort Fu's body fell, looked up at the pavilion, and then back down, saying, "Has anyone entered the pavilion?"

"The Three Departments' people have been inside."

"Did they take or damage anything?"

"No, your servant was watching closely the entire time. The broken railing was also kept in the storeroom and wasn't taken by the Three Departments."

\*Someone supervising... Forbidding the removal of evidence from the scene... Emperor Yuanjing, a master of power manipulation, has completely blocked the possibility of the Crown Prince's Clique cleaning up the mess for the Crown Prince.\*

Xu Qi'an said, "Open the door; I need to go up."

Entering the pavilion, he ascended the stairs to the second floor.

Xu Qi'an and Princess Huaiking scanned every corner of the scene with sharp eyes. Biaobiao glanced at them, then pretended to be "seriously searching."

Their first attention was drawn to the overturned round stool by the table, the cold cup of tea on the table, the dishevelled bed, the torn bed curtain, and the wall painting on the east side...



Xu Qi'an sniffed around, his nose twitching.

"What are you sniffing?" Biaobiao couldn't hold back anymore.

"Don't interrupt; I'm smelling for deoxyribonucleic acid."

"De-what acid?" Biaobiao was confused.

Xu Qi'an didn't respond. In reality, he was just checking for any residual scent in the air, not necessarily "DNA". Given that so many days had passed, the smell couldn't possibly have remained.

But a proper examination still needed to be conducted.

Xu Qi'an pointed to the bed and asked the head guard, "Was the bed this messy?"

"It was searched by the Three Departments, but it was already in a mess when they first came," the head guard replied.

\*It's a pity that I can't test DNA; otherwise, this case would be solved instantly... How I miss the advanced technology from my previous life...\* he thought as he went to the viewing platform.

After inspecting the broken guardrail, Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged in the viewing platform, closing his eyes. His powerful mental strength greatly enhanced his profiling ability.

Based on the current details from the scene, he started sketching dynamic images in his mind:

The Crown Prince, drunk, climbed the pavilion. Consort Fu, standing by the table, poured a cup of hot tea to help him sober up. But the Crown Prince didn't touch the teacup; instead, he touched Consort Fu's hand or another part, causing her to panic and knock over the stool.

Then, the Crown Prince, using force, dragged Consort Fu to the bed. During the intense struggle, the bed was thrown into disarray, and a corner of the bed curtain was torn off. Consort Fu somehow broke free from the Crown Prince's grasp and ran towards the viewing platform to call for help, knocking down the wall painting along the way...

Seeing the situation, the Crown Prince, driven by malice, pushed Consort Fu off the viewing platform. He then went to the outer room to sleep, pretending he hadn't done anything.

Xu Qi'an opened his eyes and exhaled.

Huaiqing and Lin'an, who had been watching him closely, immediately asked, "What did you find?"

"The case isn't too difficult, but there are a few points I need to confirm first," Xu Qi'an replied.

## Chapter 239. A Great Breakthrough

\*Some points need confirmation...\* Biaobiao blurted out, "What are they?"

Huaiqing pursed her lips, pondering what discoveries Xu Qi'an might have made while also paying close attention to him. Although she had been meticulously searching through the room, her mind was still a jumble, and she hadn't found anything particularly useful or significant.

"First, if Consort Fu had indeed been assaulted by the Crown Prince, she would have definitely cried for help. So why didn't the attendants and palace maids in Qingfeng Palace hear anything? Let's go downstairs first... you go and gather all the palace maids and attendants in the courtyard," Xu Qi'an said to the head attendant.

The group immediately descended to the courtyard, where all the attendants and palace maids of Qingfeng Palace, totalling twelve individuals—four maids and eight attendants—were gathered.

"Listen up, this is Sir Xu, who has been tasked with investigating the case. He is fully in charge of the investigation into Consort Fu's murder. You must answer his questions honestly and without concealment," the head attendant said in a deep voice.

"Yes!"

The crowd responded with bowed heads.

The head attendant nodded with satisfaction and looked towards Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an singled out a graceful palace maid, gesturing for her to come closer.

The young maid shuffled forward with her head bowed.

"A little closer."

The maid stepped up to Xu Qi'an, who whispered a few words into her ear, then said, "Go ahead."

The maid quickly scurried into the pavilion.

What is he up to?

Biaobiao and the supervising eunuch were perplexed, while Huaiqing seemed to be deep in thought.

Xu Qi'an turned to the other maids and attendants, "Why was there no palace maid attending to Consort Fu on the day of the incident?"

The palace maids and attendants exchanged glances, appearing hesitant and afraid to speak.

Xu Qi'an's gaze sharpened as he reprimanded, "Anyone who conceals or withholds information will be treated as a suspect in Consort Fu's murder and will be imprisoned in the Nightwatchers' dungeon."

A young eunuch quickly replied, "My lord, we dare not approach the pavilion."

\*Dare not approach the pavilion?\*

Xu Qi'an sensed he had found something. A man entering Consort Fu's bedroom, yet the attendants in the courtyard did not dare to approach—what does that imply?

It implies the Emperor has quite the situation on his hands.

Xu Qi'an secretly thought with anticipation.

The young eunuch explained, "Consort Fu loved to drink. After getting drunk, she would often scold and beat the attendants of Qingfeng Palace. We feared being caught in her outbursts, so whenever she drank, we kept our distance."

"Is it always like this?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Yes, without exception," the eunuch replied.

"When did this start?"

The eunuch hesitated for a moment before shaking his head, "Ever since I entered the Qingfeng Palace, Consort Fu has always been this way."

\*Little chicken, your experience is lacking...\* Xu Qi'an scanned the group and asked, "Who is Consort Fu's personal maid?"

"It's your servant..." A slightly older maid stepped forward.

"You answer my previous question," Xu Qi'an directed his gaze at her.

"Well, it's just that..." The older maid hesitated, "A few years ago, Consort Fu was fine, but over the years, her personality became more and more peculiar. She would often stand alone on the pavilion, gazing at something unknown. When drinking, she liked to recite melancholic poetry..."

She spoke with subtlety, likely not daring to comment on Consort Fu or the Emperor's private affairs. But Xu Qi'an and Huaiqing were both sharp and understood the underlying meaning.

\*This is the sorrow of a lonely woman... Alas, Emperor Yuanjing is quite the character, with so many beautiful women in his harem, and yet he chose to practice cultivation and abstinence...\* Xu Qi'an sighed and continued,

"On the day of the incident, did anyone hear Consort Fu's cries for help?"

Everyone shook their heads.

Xu Qi'an didn't say anything but looked towards the direction of the pavilion, nodding slightly.

Following his gaze, they saw the young maid who had entered the pavilion earlier standing on the observation deck. At Xu Qi'an's signal, the maid closed the lattice door of the observation deck, and moments later, faint cries for help could be heard from inside.

By this point, even the less astute Biaobiao understood Xu Qi'an's intention.

"Outrageous! You dare lie! The cries for help were clear as day!" Biaobiao scolded.

The attendants in the courtyard were startled and hurriedly tried to explain.

Xu Qi'an gestured for them to calm down, then turned to the head attendant, "Bring out the broken section of the railing..."

Next, he looked at the older maid and said, "You stay. The rest can leave."

The older maid looked a bit flustered, wringing her hands nervously.

"Little eunuch, you go to the outer courtyard. I'll call you back in a bit," Xu Qi'an anticipated a rebuttal from the seemingly obtuse young eunuch, preparing to bring Huaiqing and Lin'an to bear.

However, the young eunuch said nothing and obediently left.

"What have you found?" Huaiqing was the first to speak once they were alone.

The aloof and proud princess had her own theories. Earlier, when the maid cried for help inside the pavilion, it was faint but audible from the outside.

There were two possibilities: either Consort Fu didn't call for help at all, or she was silenced.

"What is the Crown Prince's cultivation level?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"He's trained in martial arts for a few years, skilled in archery and horseback riding," Huaiqing replied.

\*Oh, a weakling...\* Xu Qi'an nodded.

The Crown Prince's cultivation was at the Refining Vitality level, perhaps not even that. This made sense; for a prince, continuing the lineage was paramount. What was individual martial prowess compared to that? The Emperor needn't lead charges in battle.

Moreover, the ability to resist temptation was a significant test. Especially for a Crown Prince surrounded by beautiful women, it would be challenging to remain chaste in the impulsive years of youth.

Xu Qi'an mused that it was only someone with great willpower, like himself, who could stay single for nineteen years.

"Although the Crown Prince's cultivation is shallow, overpowering a frail woman would still be easy, so it's possible that Consort Fu never had the chance to call for help," Xu Qi'an surmised.

"My brother the Crown Prince would never do such a thing," Biaobiao retorted immediately, showing a display of stubbornness that a sister ought.

Xu Qi'an didn't respond to Biaobiao, who was pouting her cheeks in defiance. Instead, he coldly looked at the older maid, "You weren't completely truthful earlier, were you?"

A flash of panic crossed the maid's eyes, and she shook her head, "Everything I said was the truth. I didn't lie. Please believe me."

"You didn't lie, but you didn't tell the whole truth, right?" Xu Qi'an tapped her leg with the scabbard, "I'm not very patient. If you don't speak, you'll be taken to the Nightwatcher's dungeon to confess. I can't guarantee how the guards there will treat you."

These young maids and eunuchs were cunning but timid, so intimidation was the best approach.

The maid bit her lip and, after a moment of hesitation, said, "Your Highnesses, Lord Xu, please follow me."

She turned and entered the pavilion, with Xu Qi'an, Huaqing, and Lin'an following behind.

Returning to the bedroom, the palace maid went straight under the bed and, with some effort, pulled out a large wooden box. From beneath layers of old clothes, she retrieved a small wooden case.

With her head bowed and trembling slightly, the palace maid presented the wooden case.

Xu Qi'an took it, opened the case, and upon seeing what was inside, one single word filled up his mind: \*Woah!\*

Had it not been for Lin'an and Huaqing standing beside him, he might have let out an exaggerated whistle.

Inside the wooden box lay a jade-carved object, 15 centimetres long and 4 centimetres in diameter, with a mischievous-looking head and a slender body.

Xu Qi'an immediately understood why the palace maid was hesitant to speak.

This item was forbidden within the palace, far more taboo than the small "Little Liu Bei"<sup>[^1]</sup> often found in women's chambers. The moral implications were one reason, but more importantly, this was the imperial palace.

Has the emperor no face?

Once discovered, the consequences could be severe, from banishment to the cold palace to demotion in rank.

\*Thus, Consort Fu's outbursts while drinking, aside from a frustrated woman's imbalance, were a prelude to some private indulgence... Such things, of course, were not for the servants to see. Aside from her closest maid, everyone else would be dismissed... Thankfully, I sent the young eunuch away; otherwise, Emperor Yuanjing would have me silenced... He's actually being betrayed by a fake, pfff...\* Xu Qi'an almost couldn't hold back his laughter.

"What is this thing?" Princess Lin'an asked with a frown.

Xu Qi'an glanced at her, then at Huaiqing. The aloof princess was expressionless, examining the "jade sceptre" with confusion in her eyes.

\*No way, not even Huaiqing, with her extensive knowledge and upbringing, recognises it? Don't you read any naughty texts?\*

Xu Qi'an coughed and explained, "It's a man's vital part."

Lin'an let out a startled "ah" and stepped back a few paces, her round face turning red, with her neck and ears also flushed.

Xu Qi'an thought, \*Is this all it takes to scare you? I have a bigger one.\*

Huaiqing recoiled as if touched by electricity, turning her head away, her fair face lightly blushed.

"H- h- how could consort Fu- how could she hide such a thing? It's disgraceful. Quick, put it away..." Lin'an stammered in her reprimand.

\*Don't be so quick to judge. Maybe your mother also has one under her bed...\* Xu Qi'an closed the box and handed it back to the palace maid, saying, "Put it back, don't taint the princesses' eyes."

The palace maid obediently followed his instructions.

Xu Qi'an asked, "On the day Consort Fu fell from the tower, was this item on the bed or in the box?"

"It should have been in the box," the palace maid replied.

\*If it were on the bed, the report wouldn't have left it out...\* Xu Qi'an nodded and asked again, "Was the missing maid also one of Consort Fu's close attendants like you?"

The palace maid nodded.

"Alright, you may go now."

After she left, Xu Qi'an sat at the table, lamenting that he couldn't take the "jade sceptre" for examination while he explained to the two inexperienced princesses:

"On the day Consort Fu fell from the tower, the servants in the courtyard didn't hear her call for help. There are two possibilities: either the Crown Prince subdued her, or Consort Fu willingly had an affair with the Crown Prince."

Huaiqing shook her head, "If it were a willing affair, why were there signs of resistance and struggle in the room?"

"You clearly lack experience..." Xu Qi'an smiled and said, "There are still two possibilities: First, Consort Fu resisted at first but the Crown Prince somehow coerced her. Second, sometimes, male and female affection doesn't have to take place on the bed."

Both princesses blushed and spat in embarrassment.

"Then why did Consort Fu fall from the tower? You said she was pushed," Huaiqing questioned.

"I can't answer that right now," Xu Qi'an analyzed, "On the day of the incident, Consort Fu had been drinking. What she would do next is take out the 'jade sceptre' to... let out some frustration."

"If I were the Crown Prince, I would use that to coerce her into a long-term secret relationship. A woman who's been alone for a long time might be half-hearted about it, and there's no need to push her out of the tower. Even if the Crown Prince sobered up and wanted to kill her to silence her, it shouldn't be after the act, because during the time of clarity afterwards, a man is the calmest and wouldn't act on impulse."

"Another point of doubt, Consort Fu, needing to do such a thing, dismissed the palace maids and attendants from the tower. It makes even less sense to then send a personal maid to invite the Crown Prince, unless they had an affair long before."

"But according to the investigation of the Three Departments and the testimonies of the servants and maids in the courtyard, there was no prior relationship between Consort Fu and the Crown Prince."

"So, my brother the Crown Prince was truly wronged." Lin'an's eyes sparkled with hope.

"That's quite possible, but it's too early to conclude." Xu Qi'an nodded.

Huaiqing asked, "How did you know the palace maid was hiding something?"

Her clear and bright eyes were fixed on Xu Qi'an. It seemed like she was asking for guidance but also found it hard to swallow her pride.

\*Consider studying the psychology of microexpressions...\* Xu Qi'an said, "A person's facial and body movements can reveal their inner thoughts to a certain extent; they are more honest than words."

Huaiqing frowned, "I've never seen a book documenting such knowledge."

"I figured it out myself."

Huaiqing slowly nodded, somewhat impressed, "You really are a genius at solving cases."

\*... In reality, solving cases isn't about talent, it's about experience and knowledge. Without those, even a genius at deduction wouldn't make it past the threshold.\* Xu Qi'an smiled, "Your Highness flatters me."

At this moment, the head attendant called from downstairs, "Sir Xu, we've brought the items."

Xu Qi'an immediately stood up and said, "Now, I'll test one of my theories. We might soon find out how Consort Fu died."

The three went downstairs, where Xu Qi'an took the broken railing from the guard and carefully examined the break, inspecting it repeatedly.

He fell into deep thought.

The red-dressed and white-dressed princesses, understanding his need for concentration, did not interrupt him.

Even though Lin'an's feet under her skirt were nervously shuffling, showing her anxiousness.

Because Xu Qi'an had mentioned that the truth of Consort Fu's death would soon be revealed. Since it concerned her brother's innocence, she was very eager.

Yet she dared not disturb his thinking.

"Let's go to the icehouse. Princess Huaiqing, please summon a nanny." Xu Qi'an led the group away from the Qingfeng Palace, and Huaiqing instructed the guards outside the palace to fetch the old nanny.

Arriving at the icehouse, they left the guards outside. Xu Qi'an, Huaiqing, Lin'an, the supervising little eunuch, and the old nanny entered the icehouse and once again saw Consort Fu's body.

"Please remove Consort Fu's clothing and turn her over," Xu Qi'an requested.

The nanny hesitated, but seeing Xu Qi'an respectfully turn his back, she looked to Princess Huaiqing for approval, not to Lin'an.

Huaiqing nodded, "Do as Sir Xu says."

A few minutes later, the maid said, "It's done."

Xu Qi'an turned around. Consort Fu lay naked, prone on the wooden board, her pale back covered in livor mortis, but without the marks Xu Qi'an had expected to see.

"That's all." He nodded.

Leaving the icehouse, they gathered in a side room. Lin'an couldn't wait and asked, "So, how did Consort Fu die? My brother, the Crown Prince, is innocent, right?"

Xu Qi'an glanced at the supervising young eunuch, then at the two princesses, and said solemnly, "Consort Fu likely fell from the tower by herself."

"How do you know?" Huaiqing raised an eyebrow.

This conclusion surprised everyone.

"The railings of the Qingfeng Palace pavilion are not rotting, rather they are very sturdy. If Consort Fu was pushed down, her body would inevitably leave bruises on her back from hitting the railings.

"But the examination just now showed that Consort Fu's back did not have any long-shaped bruises, only livor mortis and block-shaped bruises from the fall," Xu Qi'an said.

Huaiqing pondered, "But she did indeed die from breaking through the railings... Are you saying someone tampered with the railings?"

Xu Qi'an nodded. "Besides, after Consort Fu fell, she had been drinking. The palace maid at Qingfeng Palace said she often watched the scenery from the lookout tower... I guess she was watching to see if His Majesty would come, though that's not important.

"The important thing is that when people drink, they instinctively lean or rest on the railing. Consort Fu fell on her back, so she must have been leaning on the railing. But because the railing was tampered with, she fell to her death.

"I asked earlier, the jade sceptre wasn't taken out during the incident. This means that Consort Fu didn't use the jade sceptre immediately that day... you know what I mean. So, the possibility of her standing at the lookout tower is very high.

"The coroner's report that she wasn't violated also serves as evidence. The maids of Qingfeng Palace didn't hear any cries for help because Consort Fu wasn't assaulted and naturally didn't need to cry out."

Huaiqing and Lin'an suddenly understood, the latter genuinely happy because the suspicion on the Crown Prince lessened significantly.

The former fell into deep thought, mulling over Xu Qi'an's analysis like a top student digesting a teacher's lecture.

The supervising little eunuch bowed his head, silently noting down every word Xu Qi'an said to report to his father eunuch later.

At this point, the old nanny interjected, "Sir, it was this old servant, not the coroner, who examined Consort Fu."

"Oh, it was nanny. That's perfect, I have some details to ask."

He pulled the old nanny aside and whispered, "Nanny, your standard for determining whether someone was violated is based on the man's... emission, or...?"

He asked his question quietly.

The old nanny whispered a brief explanation.

"Oh, I see," Xu Qi'an said.

This further confirmed that Consort Fu was not raped but indeed died from an accident, a meticulously arranged accident.

Since it wasn't a crime of passion, the Crown Prince's suspicion was very light.

After receiving confirmation, Xu Qi'an said, "The only one who could have done this must be that close palace maid."

Of course, the palace maid wouldn't kill Consort Fu and frame the Crown Prince without reason. Even Lin'an could figure this out.

"Who would instruct the palace maid to do this?" Lin'an glanced at Huaiqing with distrust.

Huaiqing sneered, and Lin'an immediately shrank behind Xu Qi'an.



Not bothering to argue with Lin'an, she frowned and asked, "Then how do you explain the mess in the room?"

"The palace maid couldn't have deliberately messed up the room in front of Consort Fu before she fell. And after Consort Fu fell, the Qingfeng Palace servants would have noticed immediately."

"Maybe Consort Fu was in a terrible mood and messed up the room herself. Or maybe there was something wrong with the alcohol, like hallucinations," Xu Qi'an explained.

Unfortunately, without an autopsy on Consort Fu, this speculation cannot be confirmed.

"Let's call it a day. I want to go back and think things over, sort out the case," Xu Qi'an said.

He couldn't say he was slacking off.

After sending Princess Lin'an back to Shaoyin Courtyard, Xu Qi'an saw Princess Huaiqing waiting outside, and he knowingly walked over.

The two walked silently, the guards trailing far behind.

"I didn't expect that once you got involved, Consort Fu's case would immediately have a breakthrough," Princess Huaiqing praised.

"This case isn't actually difficult. At least proving the Crown Prince's innocence isn't hard," Xu Qi'an said, pausing for a few seconds before continuing, "The Three Judicial Departments don't seem eager to prove the Crown Prince's innocence."

Xu Qi'an always felt that the reasoning skills and investigative methods of this era were lagging, but he couldn't deny that there were still many talented people in the Three Departments.

The Consort Fu case wasn't as detailed as the tax silver case, as strange as the Sangpo case, or as mind-bending as the Yunzhou case. It didn't involve too many cultivation systems.

Proving the Crown Prince's innocence was somewhat challenging, but not impossible.

Princess Huaiqing looked ahead, silent for a dozen seconds, and then said, "This matter boils down to two possibilities: one, the Crown Prince is the real culprit. Two, the Crown Prince is being framed."

Xu Qi'an responded with a "hmm."

"If the Crown Prince is the real culprit, then he will be deposed. The official evaluation has just ended, and the national succession struggle is about to begin. Neither His Majesty nor the entire court would want such a thing to happen. Besides, it would make the Crown Prince Clique resentful, creating unnecessary enemies.

"If the Crown Prince is being framed, then who in the harem has the capability to do so? Who dares to frame even the Crown Prince? The Three Judicial Offices would rather not provoke them. After all, this is ultimately His Majesty's family matter."

Xu Qi'an answered bluntly, "All princes eligible to inherit the Eastern Palace are possible suspects."

Huaiqing said, "But the biggest suspects are my full brother and my mother."

Because the Fourth Prince is the legitimate eldest son and the first in the succession.

"Suspicion is inevitable. If there's a death of a prince in the palace, all those favoured concubines are suspects. But as long as evidence is destroyed, no matter how great the suspicion, what can be done?"

Palace intrigue is actually quite straightforward and brutal; not every concubine in the harem is a far-sighted, cunning strategist like Zhuge Liang.

Huaiqing slowly nodded.

"There's something I don't understand. The Fourth Prince is the legitimate eldest son. Why did His Majesty appoint Lin'an's full brother as the Crown Prince?"

When Xu Qi'an asked this question, he stared closely at Huaiqing. If she showed signs of annoyance or resistance, it would indicate that his behavior of having a foot in two boats had made her feel uneasy and not considered him a confidant anymore.

Huaiqing pondered for a moment, then shook her head, "No one can guess Father's mind. But once, by chance, I heard some rumors..."

Xu Qi'an quickly interrupted, "Your Highness, your servant wishes to live a long life, have children and grandchildren, and die peacefully."

Uncharacteristically, Huaiqing smiled slightly, "It's not some top secret; it doesn't matter if you hear it."

After a pause, she continued, "It is said in the palace that the reason the Crown Prince is the Crown Prince is because Noble Consort Chen was the most favoured in her youth, thus Father broke the rules by appointing a son born of a concubine as the Crown Prince.

"But my elder brother once complained to me privately. In his childhood, Father treated him extremely well and often instilled in him the principles of being a ruler... So, if Father never intended to make him the Crown Prince, why would he say such things?"

Xu Qi'an turned around, waved at the distant guards, and then walked a bit further with Huaiqing. Then, unable to contain his curiosity, he rubbed his hands and asked:

"Then why was the son of a concubine ultimately made the Crown Prince?"

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Chapter 240. Xu Pingzhi: You Two Wait

"There was one year when, for some reason, Father became furious and sent Mother to the Cold Palace, even attempting to depose her. But the civil and military officials vehemently opposed it, and at that time, I was too young to remember," Princess Huaiqing said helplessly:

"Although Mother was released from the Cold Palace the following year, Father never visited her chambers again. Because of this, Fourth Brother was also neglected. And since I was born, Father never showed much affection for me.

"Noble Consort Chen is actually a very jealous and petty person. Even though the Eldest Prince was later made Crown Prince, she was always insecure and held a deep hostility towards Fourth Brother and me.

"This isn't just my narrow view. Do you know why Lin'an and I don't get along?"

Xu Qi'an felt a spark of insight. "Consort Chen instigated it?"

Huaiqing nodded slowly. "Lin'an is deeply loved by Father and spoiled in every way. In the early years, Noble Consort Chen was worried about the Crown Prince's unstable position and often incited Lin'an to cause trouble and make things difficult for me."

\*Poor Lin'an, she must have been bullied by you quite badly...\* Even though Lin'an started it, Xu Qi'an still felt sorry for her. It wasn't about favouring one wife over another; all are equally cherished. He just felt that with Lin'an's level of skill, she would have been no match for Huaiqing.

On second thought, this might have been exactly what Noble Consort Chen wanted. The more she understood her daughter, the more she encouraged her to provoke Huaiqing, to achieve the desired effect.

Imagine: Emperor Yuanjing doted on Lin'an, but if she constantly cried from being bullied by Huaiqing, how could he not dislike Huaiqing?

"What was the reason for His Majesty wanting to depose the Empress?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"There was no reason, which is why the officials strongly opposed it." Huaiqing shook her head.

Deposing an Empress was similar to deposing a Crown Prince. It was not only the emperor's family matter but also a national issue. The scholar-official class were not allowed to easily divorce or dismiss their primary wife, let alone the Emperor with his Empress, who was the mother of the nation.

Without a reason, how could the civil and military officials agree to Emperor Yuanjing deposing the Empress?

However, without a reason, would Emperor Yuanjing suddenly get furious and want to depose her?

There must be more to this than meets the eye.

"What year did this happened in?" After asking, Xu Qi'an realized he was being too gossipy and added, "It might be related to the case of Consort Fu... ah no, I don't mean to suspect Her Majesty."

Princess Huaiqing glanced at him and said calmly, "If you're curious, just ask. There's no need for so many excuses."

... Xu Qi'an felt a bit embarrassed.

"In the thirteenth year of Yuanjing." Huaiqing withdrew her gaze and looked into the distance. "As for the reason, I don't know. Even though I asked Mother many times later, she never answered."

\*The thirteenth year of Yuanjing sounds familiar...\* Xu Qi'an nodded. "Thank you, Princess, for telling me."

He had thought that Emperor Yuanjing didn't appoint the Fourth Prince as Crown Prince because the Crown Prince was a bit dull, but now it seems there might be deeper reasons behind it.

\*Yes, the Crown Prince may not be particularly clever, but could the Fourth Prince be much better... Hmm, it's possible the Fourth Prince is just playing dumb...\* \*I'll ask Duke Wei later. With his sharp insight, what he says about the Fourth Prince will be accurate.\*

After walking a few steps, Huaiqing suddenly said, "Why did you end it so quickly today? With your ability, there's no need to go home to 'ponder'."

Xu Qi'an felt that since Huaiqing was quite open with him, he should also be candid, which would help maintain a good relationship.

"I'm just trying to buy time," Xu Qi'an said.

"Buy time?" Huaiqing frowned.

"Yes," smelling the faint fragrance from the princess, Xu Qi'an said helplessly, "I've offended too many people during the Sangpo and Yunzhou cases, and His Majesty doesn't like me either. He originally intended to confer the title of Viscount on me, but it was cancelled because I survived.

"Later, His Majesty promised to reinstate my title as Viscount of Changle County if I do a good job in investigating Consort Fu's case."

\*I'm really having a tough time.\*

"Do you think Father will go back on his word?" Princess Huaiqing agreed. "This is a good plan. One day without the title, you delay one day."

Xu Qi'an looked at her in surprise. \*No wonder she's Wei Yuan's student; they think alike.\*

The saying "The emperor has no idle words" doesn't mean the emperor won't lie. It refers to national policies and imperial edicts.

So, as long as Emperor Yuanjing doesn't confer the title, Xu Qi'an will delay, lest the Dog Emperor goes back on his word.

"It's getting late, I should return to my residence now." Xu Qi'an glanced at the sky. If he heads back now, he can still catch lunch.

"Mm." Huaiqing nodded.

...

Meanwhile, in Emperor Yuanjing's sleeping quarters.

Half an hour before lunch, Emperor Yuanjing, having finished his meditation, returned to his quarters. The grand eunuch hurried in, grinning from ear to ear, and announced, "Your Majesty, there has been a major breakthrough in Consort Fu's case."

Emperor Yuanjing was taken aback, immediately putting on a serious expression. "Speak," he said in a deep voice.

The old eunuch relayed the information reported by the little eunuch, word for word. Emperor Yuanjing listened silently, without showing any reaction.

"Your Majesty..." The old eunuch bowed his head. "May I be so bold as to ask, does this mean the Crown Prince is innocent?"

Emperor Yuanjing shook his head slightly. "It's too early to tell... Within just two days, Xu Qi'an has managed to grasp the initial details of the case. He truly is talented, but perhaps a bit too cunning."

He snorted coldly. "Urge the cabinet to draft the edict quickly. There's no need to choose an auspicious date."

Last time, when he had the grand eunuch convey his orders to the cabinet, they had accepted but delayed, citing the lack of an auspicious date.

"As you command."

...

Uncle Xu, who was in charge of the day patrol, returned home with his helmet in his arms, the sabre by his waist swaying with each step.

There was an hour of rest at noon, and as a \*Baihu\*, Xu Pingzhi would return home for lunch during this time, taking the opportunity to have some tea.

The kitchen was still busy preparing lunch, and Auntie was in the backyard planting newly purchased bush lilies. She wore a light blue silk dress with a matching pleated long skirt, intricately embroidered with swirling cloud patterns.

As she bent over to plant the lilies, her slender waist and curvy hips were accentuated by her clothes.

Uncle Xu stood not far away, holding his helmet, and cleared his throat. "Dearest, I'm hungry. Could you hurry the kitchen along?"

Auntie continued planting flowers, ignoring him.

"Dearest?"

"What are you calling me for?" Auntie responded coldly. "Is Master Xu going to entertain colleagues tonight and not return home?"

Uncle Xu was taken aback. "What are you talking about, dearest?"

Auntie finished planting the last lily, dusted her hands, and put her hands on her hips, giving a cold smile.

"What's the saying? Right, blood is thicker than water. Your dear nephew, even after his success, hasn't forgotten you. He knows to secretly give you money."

Uncle Xu was astonished and thought to himself, \*It's been so long since Daluang gave me money. It was before he went to Yunzhou, so why are you bringing up this old matter?\*

"There's no such thing. Dalang just came back from the dead yesterday and went out for the day, not returning home. How would he have time to give me money?"

Of course, Uncle Xu wouldn't admit it even if it were true, let alone something that's completely unfounded.

Auntie, hearing this, erupted, her brows furrowing, and she raised her voice, "Xu Pingzhi, you really are planning to hide fifty taels of silver and secretly go to the brothel."

“Erlang told me this morning that Xu Ningyan secretly gave you fifty taels. I thought if you admitted it, we could let it go. I didn’t expect you to actually want to keep it hidden.

“You’re not going to admit it, are you? Would Erlang lie to me? Xu Pingzhi, you ungrateful man. I’ve managed this household with all my heart, even helping raise your unfortunate nephew, and this is how you repay me?”

“Where’s Erlang? Bring him out here.” Uncle Xu was angry.

“Pfft, Erlang is catching up on sleep. Don’t disturb him and don’t change the subject. Are you going to hand over the fifty taels or not?”

“... I’ll hand it over, just don’t be angry, dearest.” Uncle Xu, crestfallen, went into the bedroom, moving quickly to prevent Auntie from discovering where he hid his banknotes.

Once in the bedroom, he went straight to Xu Lingyin’s annex, lifted his daughter’s bedding, and underneath was all his private money, a total of eighty taels.

Uncle Xu gritted his teeth and resolutely pulled out two twenty-ael and two five-ael notes.

At this moment, he suddenly noticed a bag of green oranges on the small table by the bed.

Green oranges, in Xu Pingzhi’s eyes, were not just simple oranges, which immediately aroused his suspicion.

\*Green oranges are sour and bitter, usually used for medicinal purposes. Why buy them for no reason? And why are they in Lingyin’s room?\*

With doubts in his mind, Uncle Xu left the small room and returned to the courtyard, obediently handing over the banknotes.

Auntie’s expression softened slightly, and she hummed as she pulled out a small, elegant purse and put away the notes.

Xu Pingzhi took the opportunity to ask, “Why are there green oranges on Lingyin’s table? Did Dalang buy them?”

“Erlang bought them,” Auntie replied, satisfied now that the fifty taels were accounted for.

\*Erlang bought them? Why would he buy these things... His reason for buying green oranges must be different from mine... No, wait!\*

Uncle Xu’s mind stirred. “Erlang didn’t come home all night, just like Dalang, right?”

“Erlang went out to entertain with colleagues. As for your nephew, god knows where that damned boy went.” Auntie rolled her eyes.

If it weren’t for the previous instances of social death, Xu Pingzhi would have agreed wholeheartedly with his wife. But now, he knew exactly what kind of person his son was.

\*Dalang didn't come home all night, and neither did Erlang... From what I know about Dalang, he most likely went to the Jiaofangsi, but the green oranges were bought by Erlang...\*

"Erlang smelled of oranges, didn't he?" Xu Pingzhi asked casually.

Auntie nodded, not paying much attention, as she admired the bush lilies she had planted.

\*The answer was clear... It was Dalang who taught Erlang. Without a doubt, Dalang betrayed me, and Erlang fabricated the private money story to get me... These bastards, even daring to scheme against their father.\*

Xu Pingzhi said solemnly, "It seems Erlang has been having headaches recently."

"Hmm?"

Auntie looked over, confused, but she was very concerned about her son.

"Green oranges can soothe the nerves and relieve headaches, among other benefits. Otherwise, why would anyone sell such sour and bitter things?" Xu Pingzhi explained.

Green oranges do have medicinal value, but treating headaches was something Uncle Xu made up. After all, his wife, who rarely touched domestic chores and hadn't read much, wouldn't be able to see through it.

"It must be the stress of the imperial examinations," Auntie said, immediately feeling sorry for her son.

"Dearest, Erlang is not married yet. As his mother, you need to take good care of him and not just spend your time tending to flowers," Uncle Xu admonished.

"This was something Erlang gave to Lingyin. I thought it would be a waste to throw it away, so I left it in her room for her to eat after her studies," Auntie explained.

"Alright, no more talk. Quickly take the green oranges to the kitchen and have the cooks make soup. Erlang will need it when he wakes up. Also, make a bowl for Dalang," Xu Pingzhi said, quickly adding:

"This soup won't taste good, so Dalang probably won't want it. You, as his aunt, can't force him. Have Lingyue make it together. When he comes back tonight, he won't dare refuse."

Auntie nodded and swayed her waist as she went to get the green oranges.

Just as lunch was prepared at home, Xu Dalang returned, removed his Bronze Gong and dagger, tossed them on the ground, and sat by the table, calling out:

"Second Uncle, you're having lunch at home now?"

"I'll be coming home for lunch from now on. I just received my appointment this morning. Starting tomorrow, I'll be patrolling the inner city instead of the outer city." Xu Pingzhi said rather coldly while sipping his soup.

From the outer city to the inner city — though his title didn't change, the treatment he received was tantamount to promotion.

"That's good, that's good!"

Xu Qian took the bowl and chopsticks handed to him by Lyu'e and thought to himself, \*What's up with Second Uncle today? He looks so unhappy.\*

At this moment, Xu Xinnian came out, still sleepy. He glanced at his older brother, and the two brothers understood each other without words.

"Dad, did you and Mom have a fight today?" Xu Erlang probed, sitting down as he spoke.

"Hmph, none of you give me any peace of mind, except for Erlang, who truly is his mother's child." Auntie glared at her nephew and son.

Xu Erlang's lips curled slightly.

Xu Pingzhi calmly looked at Auntie's personal maid and said, "Lyu'e, go to the kitchen and check if the soup is ready."

Lü'e obediently responded and walked out of the side hall.

"What soup is it?"

Xu Qian, who had spent all his money the previous night, asked with great interest.

"It's to nourish you and Erlang," Auntie replied.

Xu Qian and Xu Erlang exchanged a glance, feeling something was off. How did Auntie (Mum) know that we needed nourishment?

Before long, Lyu'e came in carrying a large pot of soup, and a strong sour smell wafted through the air.

The large porcelain bowl was placed on the table, with slices of green oranges floating in the yellowish soup, not even peeled.

Auntie personally served Xu Erlang some soup, complaining, "Erlang, why didn't you tell Mum about your headache? The Spring Examinations are approaching. It's my fault; I didn't take good care of you.

"This green orange soup is something I specially prepared for you."

Green orange soup?!

\*This... isn't this the green oranges I bought?\* Xu Erlang looked bewildered, thinking, \*How can green oranges be made into soup? This could kill someone.\*

"Mom, my headache is just from drinking too much. Last night, I was out with colleagues..." Xu Erlang glanced guiltily at his older brother.

\*Green orange soup... Who came up with this dark cuisine?\* Xu Qian almost burst into laughter and said seriously:



“Green orange soup is highly nourishing. Erlang, you should drink more.”

“You have some too,” Uncle Xu Er said lightly. “This soup was painstakingly prepared by Lingyue and your Auntie.”

“?”

A big question mark appeared in Xu Qian’s mind.

“I, a dignified warrior at the Refining Spirit level, need this stuff?” Xu Qian retorted.

“Big Brother!” Xu Lingyue said softly, “Just have a bowl. We’ve been cooking it for a long time.”

Xu Qian couldn’t help but look at his younger brother.

His younger brother was also looking at him.

The two brothers were hoping the other would rise up in rebellion.

“.....”

“Gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp....”

In the end, both of them drank a big bowl, tears streaming from their eyes, their stomachs churning.

“Hahaha, eat up, eat up.” Uncle Xu Er sipped his liquor, revealing an innocent smile.