

Nightwatcher 241

Chapter 241. Xu Lingyin's Anger

Damn Xu Erlang, it must be because of him. Otherwise, Second Uncle, who cares so much about me, wouldn't make me drink this awful stuff... Xu Qi'an put down his bowl, wiped away the tears that had been choked out of him, and looked at Xu Erlang with a smiling face but inwardly cursing.

It's all Big Brother's fault. If he hadn't come up with that lousy idea of making me bring back the green oranges for Lingyin to eat, I, Xu Xinnian, wouldn't have ended up shooting myself in the foot... Xu Erlang frowned secretly, silently cursing his big brother a hundred times.

The two brothers lowered their heads to eat, trying to fill their stomachs that were churning with sour water.

"Look at them, the two brothers suddenly got their spirits up and are eating so heartily," Second Uncle Xu said, adding fuel to the fire, laughing heartily.

Xu Qi'an and Xu Erlang ignored this middle-aged man, who looked honest on the outside but was actually an insidious character.

After suppressing the urge to vomit with food, Xu Erlang slowly let out a breath and slowed down his eating pace.

"Cijiu, Big Brother has a question for you."

Given that the boat of friendship between him and his little brother was on the verge of sinking, Xu Qi'an was very polite with his words.

"What's the matter?"

Xu Xinnian, resembling his mother, lifted his chin haughtily. He seemed to remember something and added, "I won't do anything unreasonable."

For instance, the matter of where Big Brother's Diao Chan^[1] is.

This trivial matter had long been forgotten by Xu Qi'an because Fuxiang was very satisfied with his waist strength, so Freeloader Xu was very confident in his abilities and gradually let go of this sudden idea.

"You're well read in history, do you know that Emperor Yuanjing once deposed the Empress?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Hey!" Xu Pingzhi tapped the edge of his bowl with his chopsticks, producing a clear sound, and warned, "Even at home, you should address His Majesty respectfully to get into the habit, so you don't accidentally blurt out something improper outside and cause trouble."

Yuanjing was the era name.

Using the era name to refer to the emperor was considered very disrespectful, just like many people in the martial world liked to refer to Wei Yuan as Azure Cloak Wei.

“Emperor Yuanjing deposed the Empress? Yes, I know, it was said to have caused quite a stir back then,” Xu Erlang said.

“Hey, you...” Second Uncle Xu looked at his son.

But his nephew and son tacitly ignored him and continued their conversation.

“Why did he depose the Empress?”

“I don’t know. The history books didn’t mention it, but it was quite a big deal at the time. The entire court, both civil and military officials, were passionately remonstrating, and the censors and attendants were so agitated that they almost wanted to climb on top of Emperor Yuanjing to make a point,” Xu Erlang said, picking up a piece of food with his chopsticks and eating as he spoke:

“In the end, the passionate remonstrance was sent back. Although the Empress wasn’t deposed, she was confined to the cold palace and didn’t come out until the fourteenth year of Yuanjing.”

Normally, the emperor’s every word and action, and his demeanour in court, would be recorded by the historians.

For the first few years that Emperor Yuanjing was practicing Daoism, the historians’ records were: The Emperor was practicing Daoism, neglecting state affairs!

Emperor Yuanjing, after seeing this, was furious and demanded that the historians change their records. The historians, however, were unwilling to be 404’ed even in the face of severe punishment. After three consecutive historians were beaten with rods and one was dismissed, the historians finally bowed in humiliation and changed it to:

The Emperor was practicing Daoism without neglecting state affairs.

However, in later years, when future generations revised this part of history, Emperor Yuanjing was likely to be reverted to his true colours and even vilified.

“So why was she released later?”

Xu Qi'an was too embarrassed to ask Huaiqing about it at the time, after all, it was a painful chapter in her parents’ lives. But then again, whose parents haven’t threatened divorce?

“That year, Wei Yuan achieved a great victory against the northern barbarians and returned in triumph. Emperor Yuanjing then granted a general amnesty, and conveniently pardoned the Empress as well,” Xu Erlang said.

No wonder Yuanjing 13th year sounded so familiar to me. It was the year Wei Yuan became famous... Sorry, Duke Wei, I didn’t mean to disrespect you.

So that was the year Wei Yuan first showed his remarkable talent. On the way to Yunzhou, Number Four once said that in the 13th year of Yuanjing, after the autumn harvest, Wei Yuan was given the task and led the army north. In just a month and a half, he defeated the northern barbarians’ cavalry.

No wonder Huaqing became Wei Yuan's disciple. It turns out the Empress had received Wei Yuan's favor... Xu Qi'an suddenly realized.

Although I didn't figure out why the Empress was deposed, it wasn't a total loss.

At least Detective Freeloader Xu could deduce from this that even if the Empress made a mistake, it wasn't a serious one, or else Emperor Yuanjing wouldn't have pardoned her so conveniently.

"Ningyan, if you have time after your meal, go pick up Lingyin."

Auntie had an attitude of not getting along with her unlucky nephew, but she was not polite at all when ordering him around.

There were only so many introductory books for children, and they couldn't be made to study all day. Plus, kids are naturally playful, and being confined to the classroom all day might not be beneficial.

So usually, class ended right after quarter past midday.

"Why doesn't Cijiu go?" Xu Qi'an tried to shirk.

"Cijiu has to study in the study room in the afternoon," Auntie said, displeased. "I ask you to do something, and you just try to avoid it."

Xu Qi'an glanced at her, "Auntie, why don't you return all the silk to me?"

Auntie squeezed out a sweet smile, "Oh, Ningyan, we're family. Come on, eat up, eat up. Have a piece of chicken."

Ever since Xu Qi'an got promoted, got rich, and bought a new house, Auntie couldn't stand up straight in front of him. Her words were no longer as firm and confident.

After asking for the address, Xu Qi'an continued, "Lingyue, why don't you come with me? It'll be a good opportunity to take you sisters for a stroll in the inner city and buy some jewellery or something."

Hearing this, Auntie said, "Ningyan, why doesn't Auntie come along too?"

You're just trying to rip me off, aren't you... Xu Qi'an scrutinized Auntie's beautiful face with a questioning look, "Sure, but we're not buying jewellery."

This brat is so stingy... Auntie said with a stern face, "I won't go then."

"Second Uncle, you see, Auntie just wants to take advantage of me. It's pitiful that I haven't even married yet. I need to save up for a wife," Xu Qi'an immediately complained.

Second Uncle Xu said helplessly, "Didn't I just give you fifty taels?"

"How dare you mention those fifty taels," Auntie said angrily, slamming the table.

"Where did you get so much silver? Isn't it given by someone?"

Xu Qi'an understood. *No wonder Second Uncle was in a bad mood today. It turns out Auntie confiscated his private stash... But you shouldn't take it out on me.*

He complained in his heart.

...

Qingyun Hall.

The name "Qingyun Hall" has a dual meaning: firstly, it implies "soaring high" in life, and secondly, it rides on the popularity of Qingyun Mountain just outside the capital.

The private school was run by an elderly scholar named Li Bingyi. At the venerable age of fifty, his eyesight was beginning to fail, which was why he had humbled himself to educate young children.

The tuition fees were quite steep and paid every three months.

Mr. Li Bingyi had a rule: if there were scholars in the family, the tuition was halved; if there were officials, it was halved again. Of course, this only applied to civil officials, not military officers.

Using this rule, Mr. Li Bingyi turned Qingyun Hall into a "primary school of the nobility." Wealthy families, who were not short of money, found this rule interesting as it highlighted their status. Besides, Mr. Li Bingyi was indeed a capable teacher.

Thus, families who didn't have time to teach their children themselves were willing to send them to Qingyun Hall.

A month or so ago, Mr. Li Bingyi encountered the biggest challenge of his teaching career: the most difficult student he had ever taught.

"Xu Lingyin, stand up!"

Mr. Li, standing at the lectern, grabbed a bamboo stick and pounded the desk loudly.

There were over twenty young children sitting in the classroom. In the corner on the east side, a little girl with her hair tied up in a child's bun obediently stood up.

Her features were ordinary, with a round face resembling a bun, but her eyes were bright and spirited.

"Recite the _Three Character Classic_," Mr. Li instructed calmly, sitting cross-legged.

"When people are born, their nature is good. Their natures are similar..."

At this point, the little girl got stuck.

Mr. Li was used to this and didn't get angry. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, "Why is it that after half a month, you can still only recite these three lines?"

This kind of slow child wasn't worth getting angry over.

Xu Lingyin responded in a sweet voice, "My dad says, 'Master one thing and it will serve you everywhere.'"

Is that saying even applicable here...? Mr. Li was taken aback, but then he remembered that this child's father was a coarse warrior, and so he let it go.

"Every day during the readings, you're the loudest. You have no trouble recognizing the characters. So why, when it's time to recite, do you freeze up? The sage said, 'Investigate everything and understand its reason.' Have you reflected on yourself?"

Xu Lingyin looked confused, "But sir, you've only taught me these three lines."

The entire class burst into laughter.

Mr. Li, feeling exhausted, waved his hand, "You may sit down."

In this child's family, only her second brother was a scholar, and he was a student at the Cloud Deer Academy. It was really hard to understand how such a diverse set of children could come from the same household.

Glancing at the water clock, it was time for lunch. Mr. Li cleared his throat, "You have half an hour for your meal. Remember, do not speak while eating."

With that, he left the classroom and went to the back courtyard for his lunch.

The children were immediately freed, chatting and laughing as they took out their food from their small cloth bags.

Xu Lingyin's lunch was particularly sumptuous today, with crystal dumplings, plum blossom pastries, fish balls, and some of the best cakes from Guiyuelou.

Her meal was two to three times the amount of the other children's.

Xu Lingyin meticulously arranged her food and swallowed, having thought about the food in her bag all morning.

No one in the entire class had a more lavish or expensive meal than Xu Lingyin, but there was a reason for her bountiful lunch.

Yesterday was the memorial day for Xu Dalang. The Xu family had purchased top-quality ingredients for a grand funeral.

Who would have thought that Xu Dalang would return? After entertaining the Xu clan members, there was plenty of delicious food left over.

"Your food is mine."

A chubby boy approached Xu Lingyin's desk, looking down at her arrogantly.

The chubby boy was the king of the classroom, the tallest and strongest, a year older than Xu Lingyin, making him seven years old.

Not only was he the tallest and strongest, but his family background was also the most prominent. While his parents weren't notable, his grand-uncle was a Minister of Personnel, a fifth-rank official.

The Ministry of Personnel was acknowledged as the foremost of the Six Ministries, and the Personnel Division was responsible for appointments, rivaled only by the Examination Division within the Ministry.

"No!"

Xu Lingyin protected her food, glaring fiercely.

"Do you want to get beaten again?" The chubby boy widened his eyes.

The bracelet on Xu Lingyin's wrist was taken by him. At first, the little girl didn't want to give it up, but after he pushed her to the ground and hit her twice, he took it by force.

The foolish little girl neither cried nor made a fuss, as if the bracelet being gone was no big deal.

The chubby boy went home and lied to his mother, saying the bracelet was found. His mother was pleased because the bracelet fetched eight taels of silver at the pawnshop.

Later, the foolish girl's mother came to the school to confront him, but since Xu Lingyin didn't point him out, her fierce mother was turned away by Mr. Li.

Thus, the chubby boy knew that taking this "classmate's" bracelet was safe. He could make money, and wouldn't get punished by the adults.

For the first few days, he kept staring at Xu Lingyin's wrist, but after that incident, she stopped wearing bracelets.

This foolish girl was easy to bully, but previously not worth bullying. This time was different. The chubby boy recognized the Guiyuelou pastries at a glance. He had been to Guiyuelou and found their pastries to be delicious.

The chubby boy wanted to eat her food and was determined to get it. The children in the class were all afraid of him, and no one dared to go against him.

"Go away!"

Xu Lingyin yelled, glaring and baring her teeth like a little beast protecting its food.

The chubby boy was stunned, seemingly not expecting the normally timid girl to suddenly stand up to him, even daring to challenge him.

He became angry.

"You wanna go?"

He clenched his fist, gritted his teeth, and swung at Xu Lingyin's head with all his might, landing two heavy blows.

Xu Lingyin clutched her head in pain.

The chubby boy pushed her hard, sending her sprawling to the ground. Satisfied, he grabbed the box of pastries and held them proudly in his arms.

"If you'd been sensible sooner, you wouldn't have had to suffer so much. Does your family have any more of these delicious treats? If so, bring them tomorrow."

He strutted back to his seat.

The children nearby watched the scene, some envious, thinking that if they had joined in earlier, they too would have the delicious snacks now.

Xu Lingyin, in her six years of life, had never experienced such an unprecedented surge of anger.

She got up quietly, without a word, and walked over to Mr. Li's lectern, grabbing the hard and thick bamboo stick.

"She's going to hit you with the teacher's stick," a child behind the chubby boy warned, tapping him on the shoulder.

The chubby boy looked up and saw the usually quiet little girl raise the bamboo stick high, her small chest swelling with a powerful shout: “Ya!”

Crack!

The bamboo stick came down hard on the chubby boy’s head, the force so strong that the stick broke on impact.

The chubby boy’s eyes rolled back, and he lost consciousness, collapsing backward, still with a pastry in his mouth.

Xu Lingyin’s small hand was reddened by the recoil of the bamboo stick.

The children in the school were stunned, some scared, some unsure of what to do. But a clever child quickly ran to the back courtyard to find Mr. Li.

Mr. Li was having lunch with his wife, with two maids standing by.

“Sir, sir... that silly girl has killed someone.” A boy burst in, breathless, shouting with all his might.

Li Bingyi, a man of letters with a calm demeanor, frowned and asked, “What happened?”

“The silly girl beat the chubby boy to death with your bamboo stick,” the boy exaggerated, pointing outside.

“I’ll go take a look.” Mr. Li set down his chopsticks, stood up, and led the boy back to the classroom.

Crossing the inner courtyard, he entered the main hall and saw a group of children surrounding the chubby boy, who was sprawled on the ground, seemingly lifeless.

He was immediately startled and called for his wife to help look after the chubby boy, sending a servant to the nearest clinic to fetch a doctor.

Fortunately, the school was in a good location, and the clinic was nearby. The doctor arrived quickly.

After examining the boy, the doctor’s expression was serious. “He’s not in any mortal danger, but he will need to rest in bed for a few days.”

Mr. Li was relieved.

“How did this child get hurt?” the doctor asked.

“Just some roughhousing between children...”

“Children’s roughhousing, and yet the injury is this severe?”

Mr. Li could no longer contain his anger. He grabbed Xu Lingyin by the collar and dragged her over, shouting, “Xu Lingyin, why did you maliciously hurt your classmate?”

Xu Lingyin shouted back, “He stole my food.”

Mr. Li was even angrier. “You nearly beat someone to death just because of that?”

Xu Lingyin stubbornly replied, "He stole my food."

This foolish and stubborn girl pushed Mr. Li to the brink of fury. Just as he was about to reprimand her, a shout came from outside:

"Where is my young master? Who bullied our young master?"

Two strong servants burst in.

Chapter 242. Big Bwother, Am I Your Little Sweetheart

Those two servants were familiar to Mr. Li; they were the household staff from the chubby boy's residence, responsible for picking him up from school.

The two had apparently received word from some "little spies" outside, informing them that their young master had been beaten, and the situation seemed quite serious since the private school had called a doctor.

With a clear goal, they stormed into the inner courtyard and entered the house, immediately spotting the unconscious chubby boy lying on the bed.

"Young Master..."

One of the servants gasped and rushed to the bedside, checking for breath... he was alive.

Only then did their tense bodies relax, followed by a surge of anger. Even though the young master was beaten in the school, the master and mistress weren't judges; they would only think that the young master was injured while studying, and the servants responsible for protecting him would be punished.

The two servants glared at everyone, focusing on Mr. Li, and shouted, "Which little brat beat our young master?"

Mr. Li coughed and calmly said, "This is a misunderstanding. Please take him home first, and I will personally visit later."

He planned to wait for Xu Lingyin's family to arrive, then discuss going to the residence to apologize.

He intended to mediate and resolve the matter peacefully.

After all, it was an incident of severe fighting among children in his private school, and it would negatively impact his reputation if it escalated.

Servants were cruder than martial artists.

"Spare me your excuses. All I know is that our young master was beaten. If you don't hand over the culprit, I'll report to the authorities," the servant shouted.

Another servant blocked the courtyard entrance, preventing anyone from leaving.

Mr. Li sneered, "According to the *Imperial Statutes · General Provisions*: 'Those under fifteen or with physical disabilities convicted of crimes punishable by exile or below may pay a fine. Those

under ten, if convicted of rebellion or homicide and sentenced to death, shall be pardoned upon review; theft and assault are also subject to fines.'

"The government office is half an hour's walk to the right from the school. Feel free to go and return quickly."

In summary, children's crimes could be substituted with fines.

The two servants, unable to argue with Mr. Li on legal grounds, were both furious and angry, rolling up their sleeves to fight.

At this Mument, a boy pointed at Xu Lingyin and shouted, "It was her who did it! She used the bamboo stick to beat him."

"So, it was you!"

At this point, the servants finally noticed Mr. Li subtly blocking a little girl. In truth, they hadn't noticed her at all, as their attention was focused on a few robust-looking boys.

The little girl, plain and not particularly clever-looking, was the last person they'd suspect of being the culprit.

However, upon realizing it, the servant noticed the girl's sturdy physique, round face, round belly, and round hands and feet.

A bundle of strength...

"Take her away!"

One servant picked up the chubby boy, while the other moved to grab Xu Lingyin by the collar.

"What are you doing?" Mr. Li huffed, glaring at them.

"Move!"

The servant pushed him aside, yelling, "I don't care about your laws; she needs to be held accountable. We're taking her back to the estate for the master and mistress to deal with. You'd better notify this brat's family to come to Zhao's estate to bail her out."

He sneered, "If they're late, missing limbs won't be our fault."

At the very least, she'd get a beating. Hurting their young master couldn't be settled just with money. Back at the estate, the girl would undoubtedly face a severe punishment.

"I won't go; I won't go! I want to wait for my Mum." The little one was lifted, kicking in protest.

"tui, tui..." The little one spat at him.

"Behave."

The servant, already seething, raised his hand to slap her.

But Mr. Li, quick-eyed and quick-handed, blocked the slap. His beard and hair bristled as he roared:

“I’m a scholar with academic credentials. If you dare lay a finger on her, I’ll sue you to high heaven!”

The servant scoffed, “So what if you’re a scholar? Every New Year and festival, plenty of scholars and even officials come to our estate. You, old man, are nothing. Move aside.”

He shoved Mr. Li aside and, with his companion, walked out.

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Xu Qian rode his horse, trotting along under the warm sun, grumbling:

“All this fuss over a damned bracelet. Auntie’s been obsessing over it for so long. Why doesn’t she ask Uncle to handle it?”

Auntie still insisted on coming along, thinking about the bracelet she bought for Xu Lingyin that went missing. Now that Xu Qian was back, she wanted to rely on him to reason with the teacher at the private school.

“Recently, His Majesty held the Spring Festival. Your Second Uncle didn’t have time to deal with such trivial matters.”

She opened the curtain, revealing her sharp chin and lips adorned with bright red lipstick.

No matter the era, women confident in their beauty would always wear makeup when going out.

“Isn’t Erlang back?” Xu Qian casually replied.

She rolled her eyes at her nephew, “Erlang is preparing for the Spring Examinations. His mind isn’t on this. Besides, Erlang doesn’t have a title yet. He’s not like you martial artists who can fight. All he has is his eloquence.”

Xu Qian thought to himself, *Erlang’s “eloquence” could infuriate a martial artist to the point of spontaneous combustion; it’s very deadly*

Poor Erlang, despite Auntie’s constant nagging about how “Erlang needs to prepare for the Spring Exams,” and “Erlang, Mother will take good care of you.”

But in her everyday life, she’d go about her entertainment as usual.

At most, she’d give him an extra meal during dinner and offer some verbal concern.

A mother as unique as Auntie in this era was truly rare... Xu Qian kept quiet, taking in the scenery along the street.

He thought of his maternal grandfather, who probably knew his daughter wasn’t cut out to be a noblewoman in a wealthy family.

So, he married her off to a household of modest background that would cherish her beauty, rather than letting her suffer in a noble family.

Thus, she wasn’t taught to read or write.

Auntie closed the curtain, leaned toward Xu Lingyue, and whispered, “After picking up Lingyin, Lingyue, take your big brother to the jewelry store for a stroll.”

“And then help Mum buy some jewelry, right?” Xu Lingyue glanced at her mother.

“No need, I’ll choose for myself,” Auntie said.

“...” Xu Lingyue sighed, “Mum thinks big brother is more reliable, right? That’s why as soon as he’s back, you’re eager to have him stand up for justice.”

“I didn’t say that,” Auntie denied.

Xu Lingyue smiled, not exposing her. In this family, even though Second Brother had a promising future, he hadn’t yet made a name for himself. Father, after years in the bureaucracy, had become a seasoned official, not easily angered or prone to making enemies.

Relying on him to make a fuss over a bracelet was impossible.

Only Big Brother was bold and shameless. Plus, as a Nightwatcher, he held real power. Coupled with his extensive connections, he wasn’t afraid of trouble.

But after all these years of fighting with Big Brother, Auntie would never admit she relied on her unlucky nephew.

They soon arrived at the private school. The carriage stopped by the roadside, and the driver took down a small wooden stool, saying, “Madam, Miss, we’re here.”

Auntie and Lingyue lifted the curtain and got out of the carriage.

Xu Qi’an said, “I’ll go tie up the horse and buy some snacks for Lingyin, Auntie, and Lingyue; you two go in first.”

“Can’t you just buy them after we pick her up?” Auntie asked, holding her daughter's hand.

The surprise is different, especially for a little foodie... Xu Qi’an smiled and didn’t explain.

Auntie pursed her lips and, along with Xu Lingyue, entered the private school.

As soon as they walked in, Auntie heard her youngest daughter crying and saw her being carried out by a burly man.

Xu Lingyin struggled hard but couldn’t break free from the adult’s grasp.

“Who are you, and what are you doing with my daughter?” Auntie blocked the two servants, her eyebrows raised in anger.

“Mum, Mum, they’re bad people, they’re bad people. Tell Big Brother to beat them up,” Xu Lingyin shouted, spitting enthusiastically at the servants in between her cries.

“Are you this girl’s mother?”

The servant looked Auntie up and down, unable to take his eyes off her; he had never seen such a beautiful woman in his life.

Then, his gaze fell on Xu Lingyue, and he was even more surprised.

However, seeing no servants accompanying Auntie and Xu Lingyue, the servant felt relieved and put on a fierce face:

“Your girl hurt our young master, so we’re taking her away.”

Of course, Auntie wouldn’t agree. She blocked their way, but the servant was more of a scoundrel. He deliberately used his body to push Auntie, forcing her to step back.

The other servant followed suit, pushing Xu Lingyue.

The two servants laughed wildly.

Xu Lingyue, flustered and panicked, backed up to the courtyard gate, stumbled over the threshold, and fell with a cry, bumping into a warm, solid shoulder.

She turned to see Xu Qi’an and immediately teared up, “Big Brother...”

Xu Qi’an, holding a skewer of fried fish balls and a meat pie, steadied Xu Lingyue and squinted at the two servants, “She’s my sister.”

With a man now supporting them, Auntie felt relieved and leaned towards her nephew.

The servants stopped their ruckus but remained adamant, glaring at Xu Qi’an: “Your sister injured our young master; he’s barely hanging on to life.”

In fact, the doctor had explained earlier that there was no danger to his life.

But the servants wouldn’t admit it; maintaining the moral high ground was the key to speaking with confidence. Even village bumpkins know that trick.

“A disgrace, a disgrace to scholarhood!”

At this moment, Mr. Li also came out, relieved to see Auntie.

“Mr. Li, what’s going on here?” Auntie asked loudly.

Mr. Li explained the situation and sighed, “Your family is indeed at fault. Please give this old man some face and resolve this matter peacefully.”

So, it was about food being snatched away... Xu Qi’an nodded and said, “Alright, put my sister down, and go call the boy’s parents over.”

He figured they’d have to pay compensation, but as long as the little one didn’t suffer, that was fine.

Xu Qi’an was always a reasonable person.

“Screw you you son of a ...”

The servant holding Xu Lingyin let out a torrent of swear words and said, “What if you run off? We must take this girl. Even if the jade emperor himself came, it wouldn’t matter.”

“Don’t be rash, don’t be rash. How about this, I’ll go with you to the Zhao residence...”

Mr. Li quickly tried to mediate.

Before he could finish, he felt a blur in front of his eyes; the young man’s figure disappeared.

Then, there was a loud slapping sound from behind, followed by a heavy thud, as if someone had fallen.

The old man immediately turned around and saw the young man holding Xu Lingyin under his arm, with a servant lying at his feet, unconscious. A few broken teeth were scattered on the ground, and blood was flowing.

“Pah, for a mere servant to be so arrogant. Let’s see who your master really is.”

Xu Qi’an was always a very reasonable person.

The other servant, holding a child, was spared Xu Qi’an’s wrath. He glared at him, “Go fetch your master.”

The servant, wary of Xu Qi’an, silently ran off.

“Big Bwother!”

Xu Lingyin stopped crying instantly. Held upside down under Xu Qi’an’s arm, she wriggled like a fish.

Auntie, displeased with how her daughter was being handled, took Xu Lingyin and carefully checked her, “Are you hurt anywhere?”

Xu Lingyin nonchalantly rubbed her head, “My head hurts. He punched me twice.”

Auntie’s face darkened.

Xu Qi’an’s eyes narrowed, “Who hit you, that little fatty or an adult?”

“The little fatty.”

Xu Qi’an let out a casual “Oh,” walked over to Li Bingyi, and asked, “Sir, how do you think we should handle this?”

He wanted to get the schoolmaster’s opinion first.

Li Bingyi pondered, “Zhao Que was somewhat injured; I reckon he’ll be bedridden for a few days. Be polite and compensate them to resolve it. That kid’s great uncle is a director of the Selection Division in the Ministry of Revenue.”

The implication was clear: you can’t match their background. If this escalates, you’ll lose.

“We’re not paying,” Auntie, hands on her hips, stood her ground with her nephew backing her up, “Who cares what director he is.”

“He’s a proper fifth-rank official,” Li Bingyi said.

“Xu Ningyan, let’s go home,” Auntie said, turning to her nephew.

Do we really have to back down so quickly... Xu Qi’an, annoyed, said, “Why go home? If they come to our house, it’ll be even more embarrassing. We should settle it here.”

After an hour, more parents came to pick up their children.

Xu Qi’an’s ears perked up, picking up on the sound of noisy footsteps.

The servant had returned, accompanied by a middle-aged man dressed as a wealthy gentleman, a woman adorned in gold and jewels, looking like a noblewoman in her thirties.

And about a dozen servants wielding sticks.

“Master, that’s the girl who hit the young master. And that guy over there, not only did he cover for her, but he also attacked one of us,” the servant complained.

As soon as the noblewoman saw Xu Qi’an and the others, she started hurling insults.

The middle-aged man, suppressing his anger, looked Xu Qi’an up and down, “Who are you, and which office does your elder work in?”

Xu Qi’an replied, “I am Xu Qi’an, and...”

He didn’t get to finish saying “Nightwatcher” before the middle-aged man cut him off coldly, “I asked about your elders.”

“My uncle, Xu Pingzhi, is a Baihu of the Imperial Guard.”

The middle-aged man dragged out an “Oh,” clearly unimpressed. Just the daughter of a mere Baihu of the Imperial Guard dared to injure his precious son.

This matter wouldn’t end so easily.

“I’ll give you two choices: one, pay 500 taels of silver in compensation. Two, I’ll take this girl to the authorities.”

“Five hundred taels?” Auntie exclaimed, “Even if your son were killed, it wouldn’t be worth that much. Don’t even think about it.”

“Wench, watch your mouth,” the noblewoman, who had just paused her tirade, was enraged again, pointing at Auntie and spitting out her words, “Look at this family, not a single decent person among them. No wonder the daughter is so wild, with a seductive mother like that. They’re all no good.”

Auntie, hands on her hips, retorted coldly, “Look at yourself, all twisted and ugly, and you still dare to show your face? Pah! I spit on you!”

The woman was furious and rushed forward, raising her hand to slap Auntie.

Auntie let out a sharp scream.

“Slap!”

Xu Qian slapped the woman hard, making her stagger and her face turn bright red.

“You...” The woman glared angrily.

“Slap!”

Xu Qian slapped her again.

The woman lost her balance, fell to the ground, and cried out, “Husband, why are you still waiting? I’m going to be beaten to death!”

The middle-aged man was already simmering with anger. Seeing that the situation couldn't be resolved peacefully, he frowned and waved his hand, "Get them!"

The servants rushed forward.

The woman pointed at Auntie and screamed, "Beat this wench to death!"

Xu Qian pulled Auntie and Lingyue behind him and kicked the leading servant.

The baton flew out of the servant's hands, and the over one-hundred-pound man was sent flying out onto the street.

He used a clever technique with that kick.

The group of servants all stopped in their tracks, gripping their batons and not daring to advance.

That kick's power wasn't something an ordinary person could manage—this guy was clearly trained.

So, he's a martial artist... The middle-aged man whispered a few words to a servant beside him, who immediately ran off.

"This is the capital; violence won't solve your problems. Young man, your sister injured someone; you have to provide an explanation," the middle-aged man said with a dark expression.

"Your son also snatched my sister's food," Xu Qian smirked.

Auntie was soothing her youngest daughter while comforting the frightened Lingyue. She looked up at Xu Qian and felt a strong sense of security.

It wasn't for nothing that I raised him.

"He's just a child. What child doesn't have a sweet tooth? Why are you being so petty with a kid? Aren't you ashamed?" the woman said loudly, though she was somewhat apprehensive and didn't dare to be too aggressive.

Xu Qian ignored her.

"So, what do you want?" the middle-aged man asked.

"Your son first stole my sister's food and then hit her. Therefore, I'm only willing to pay ten taels of silver," Xu Qian stated his stance.

He could reason things out both logically and physically, but it was a fact that Xu Lingyin had hurt someone, even if there was a reason. Based on his past experience as a police officer in his previous life, such incidents should be judged based on the extent of injuries.

However, it was just a matter of paying some compensation; there was no way he would pay more.

The middle-aged man sneered.

After a moment of confrontation, a team of city guards arrived. Leading them was a middle-aged man with piercing eyes and a serious face.

Three guards followed behind him.

He quickly surveyed the crowd in the courtyard and said in a deep voice, "What's going on here?"

The servant who had reported the incident claimed that someone was causing trouble, but the constable of the guards hadn't made up his mind yet.

"I am Zhao Shen, and my uncle is a bureau director in the Ministry of Personnel," the middle-aged man said with a bow.

The constable of the guards quickly returned the salute, "Master Zhao."

The middle-aged man nodded out of habit and pointed at Xu Qian, "This man is encouraging his sister to seriously injure my son and even attacked my servants. Please, officer, uphold justice."

The constable stared at Xu Qian for a moment. The man was handsome and seemed familiar, but he couldn't remember where he had seen him before.

"Arrest him."

Two guards pulled out ropes and approached Xu Qian.

"Constable, are you sure you want to listen to a one-sided story?" Xu Qian frowned.

The constable raised his hand, signaling the guards to stop, "Go on."

"What else is there to say? My son just took a bit of his sister's food, and that wicked girl beat him up. He not only refused to admit his mistake but also hurt my servants. Is there no justice?" the woman cried out.

The constable looked at Mr. Li and the doctor who hadn't left yet.

"It's true, but the Zhao family's arrogance was also quite extreme," Mr. Li gave a balanced response.

The doctor added, "That child will have to stay in bed for a few days to recover."

The constable nodded slowly. It was normal for the family to be angry when their child was hurt.

"Arrest him!" the constable said sternly.

Seeing the officers trying to arrest her big brother, the little one got angry and shouted, "He was the one who first stole my food. Tui tui tui..."

She spat at the guards, trying to prevent them from arresting her brother.

"He even took my bracelet," Xu Lingyin cried out.

"What?!" Auntie was shocked and furious. So, the one who stole the bracelet was that little boy from this family. Thinking about how he had snatched Lingyin's food today and punched her, Auntie's eyes turned red as she gritted her teeth:

"This is too much, too much."

Huh?

Xu Qian was stunned. He turned and asked, "Was the bracelet also taken by that little brat?"

Xu Lingyin nodded vigorously, "Yes, Big Bwother."

If this conflict was just a squabble between children, Xu Qian naturally wouldn't hold it against a kid and would just pay some medical expenses to settle it. That's why he hadn't revealed his identity or used his status to oppress them.

But clearly, the situation wasn't like that. That brat wasn't bullying Xu Lingyin for the first time. He was clearly venting his violence on her because she seemed easy to pick on.

He just happened to hit a wall this time, triggering Xu Lingyin's fierce retaliation.

This was bullying and couldn't be tolerated.

"So, it was your child all along, bullying my sister and stealing her priceless bracelet. This time, seeing her food was expensive, he tried to snatch it and then hit my sister," Xu Qian grinned:

"And now, you're using your power to blackmail me for five hundred taels of silver."

"What bracelet?" The middle-aged man snorted, "This is baseless."

His wife's eyes flickered as she seemed to think of something.

Xu Qian turned to the constable of the guards and said, "Officer, here's what happened: the Zhao family's boy repeatedly bullied my sister and stole her jade bracelet. This time, he snatched her food, and my sister couldn't bear it, so she fought back.

"That bracelet was of considerable value. You should arrest them, not me. Please help me retrieve the stolen item."

The woman shouted, "What bracelet? Nonsense! My son is well-behaved and educated. How could he do such a thing? Master, not only did they injure our son, but they're also slandering us."

The middle-aged man's face darkened, and he bowed, "Officer, please arrest this man. I will ask my uncle to come and ensure justice is served."

That last statement was crucial. The constable, upon hearing it, no longer hesitated and ordered, "Arrest him and take him to the magistrate's office."

Just as he finished speaking, he saw the young man in front of him take out something yellowish-orange from his pocket and toss it over.

The constable instinctively wanted to dodge, but as the golden object spun through the air, he caught sight of it. His face changed drastically, and as he caught it, he knelt with a thud.

He held the gold medallion in both hands, his voice trembling, "S- sir..."

As a constable in the city's police force, he often assisted the chief constable in handling significant cases and had seen the palace's gold token a few times.

What's going on?

The Zhao couple's expressions changed instantly.

Although they didn't recognize the golden token, the head constable's reaction served as the best reference.

Weren't the elders in the family said to be a Baihu in the Imperial Guards? What's going on? Does this kid have a high status? Why didn't he say so earlier?

As these questions flashed through their minds, they quickly remembered their uncle, a fifth-ranked official in the Ministry of Personnel's Selection Division, whose authority could command respect even from fourth-ranked officials.

This thought brought them some peace of mind.

Xu Qi'an stared at the head constable and asked, "What's your name?"

The head constable kept his head down, beads of cold sweat forming on his forehead as he reflected on his earlier choices. "This subordinate is Zhu Ying."

Xu Qi'an nodded. "I am investigating a case by imperial decree, and this is the golden token bestowed by His Majesty. Zhu Ying, you are a talented person. I appreciate you and have decided to involve you in this case. You will safeguard the token for me."

He paused before adding, with a hint of menace, "Lose the medallion, and your entire family will face execution."

A bead of sweat the size of a bean rolled down, hitting the ground.

Zhu Ying trembled as he responded, "This subordinate accepts the order."

Xu Qi'an nodded in satisfaction. "Continue kneeling."

Then, he pointed to the Zhao couple and commanded, "Take these two away."

This order was directed at the three bailiffs.

The three young bailiffs looked at Zhu Ying, who kept his head lowered, both angry and anxious. His voice trembled as he barked, "What are you standing around for? Carry out the order!"

The bailiffs quickly restrained the Zhao couple.

"My uncle is a fifth-ranked official in the Ministry of Personnel's Selection Division! Fifth rank!" Zhao Shen exclaimed in a mix of anger and shock.

One bailiff hit him with the scabbard, and only after being struck did he quiet down, turning to shout at his family servants, "Go fetch my uncle!"

Xu Qi'an, leading his aunt and sisters away from the school, sighed, "We can't play today. I need to go back to the Nightwatchers Constabulary to handle this matter. Auntie, would you like to come with me, or return home first?"

Auntie glanced at Little Pea, and considering it involved her daughter, she gritted her teeth and said, "To the constabulary."

Those two earlier were too hateful. Going home now would only make me angrier.

...

After they left, Mr. Li reflected on his earlier actions, feeling somewhat relieved as he confirmed he had not made any mistakes. He approached the constable, still kneeling, and asked, "Sir, that esteemed... gentleman earlier, which department is he from, and what rank?"

"I don't know," Constable Zhu, filled with regret, wished he could draw his sword and end it all, muttering, "What does rank matter? That was a golden token, do you understand?"

A golden token... Mr. Li's body trembled, and his hands shook.

That silly girl's family has such a person?!

He felt incredibly fortunate for his fair treatment and lack of bias towards the Zhao family, otherwise, his reputation and life might have been forfeit.

With this realization, he looked at Constable Zhu with a gaze full of pity.

...

On the way to the Nightwatchers Constabulary, Xu Qi'an rode with Xu Lingyin in his arms.

She held a meat pie in one hand and a bag of fried fish balls in the other, eating happily.

"About what just happened... Lingyin, do you feel satisfied?" Xu Qi'an tested, "Big brother helped you beat them. They won't escape unscathed."

In cases of bullying, the most upsetting part isn't just the physical hurt but the psychological scars left on a young heart.

"Lingyin, Lingyin?"

Xu Qi'an nudged his sister.

Xu Lingyin looked up from her food with her big, bright eyes, "What did Big Brother say?"

"Do you feel satisfied?"

"Mhm."

"Do you know what satisfaction means?"

"Mhm."

"Big brother helped you teach a lesson to that chubby kid's parents."

"Mhm."

"Your second brother died."

"Mhm."

"..."

She's just brushing me off. I'm so foolish, really. I can't believe I'm worried about this silly child's mental health.

They continued for a while, and after Xu Lingyin finished eating, she frowned and looked up, saying, "Big brother, I..."

Xu Qi'an lowered his head, concerned, "What's wrong?"

Xu Lingyin suddenly vomited into his arms, then looked regretfully and said, "I feel like throwing up."

"Why didn't you say so earlier?" Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched.

"It's the same if I say it after."

"It's not the same at all."

"I think it is."

"No, it's not about what you think, it's about what I think. You should have mentioned feeling uncomfortable because of the horse ride... Forget it, I'll deal with you when we get home." Xu Qi'an was exasperated.

"Then I'll just eat again." Xu Lingyin blinked her eyes, seeking her big brother's approval.

"You..." Xu Qi'an was heartbroken, "How could my Xu family have such a silly, greedy child?"

He turned his head towards the carriage and shouted, "Auntie, your daughter just vomited on me. Pass me your handkerchief."

Auntie lifted the curtain, gave a disdainful look, and handed over a handkerchief.

Xu Lingyue was shocked, "Mom, that's my handkerchief!"

"I know, Lingyin vomited, so let Dalang wipe himself."

"... Why not use yours?" Xu Lingyue complained.

"It's gross."

"..."

Auntie changed the topic, frustrated, "I was just too soft-hearted earlier. I should have blocked that shrew's slap and hit her back, instead of hiding behind your big brother. The more I think about it, the angrier I get."

Many people often regret not responding better during such moments, leading to increasing frustration.

Xu Lingyin watched her big brother clean off her mess and lamented, "They came out on their own."

"Don't worry, you got your money's worth." Xu Qi'an patted her head, "You can have lunch again, unlike usual when it's just once. From now on, eat and throw up; your belly will never be full, so you can always keep eating."

"Really?"

Xu Lingyin's eyes sparkled with excitement, thinking her big brother was indeed smart.

"Really." Xu Qi'an nodded.

Although, you might end up being scolded half to death by your mother.

"Big brother, am I your little sweetheart?" Xu Lingyin asked.

Xu Qi'an was surprised, "Where did that come from? You're blunter than big brother."

Little Pea replied, "Last night, I heard Dad call Mom 'sweetheart,' but no one ever calls me that."

"That's because you're not a little sweetheart."

Little Pea looked disappointed, "Then what am I?"

Xu Qi'an lowered his head, scrutinizing his chubby little sister, "You're a fatty sweetheart."

...

Chapter 243. Wei Yuan's Astonishment

From ancient times, the people have had a natural reverence for officials. Looking at the imposing government constabulary, the sword-bearing guards, and the serious-looking Nightwatchers coming and going, Auntie and Xu Lingyue felt a bit intimidated.

It was Auntie's first time visiting the constabulary, and she was very nervous. She held Xu Lingyin tightly in her arms, rubbing her vigorously to ease her tension.

The little girl's face changed into various shapes under Auntie's hands.

Xu Lingyue quietly moved closer to Xu Qi'an.

"Ningyan..."

A somewhat familiar Bronze Gong came over to greet them, his gaze lingering on Auntie and Xu Lingyue, clearly drawn by their beauty.

"This is my sister," Xu Qi'an nodded, introducing Xu Lingyue.

The Bronze Gong immediately smiled in acknowledgment, then looked at Auntie, "Is this your older sister?"

Auntie was momentarily stunned, then her face lit up, her eyes curving into crescent moons.

Xu Qi'an rolled his eyes, "Have you ever seen a 36-year-old older sister?"

"Xu Ningyan!" Auntie said, trembling with anger.

Her age had been revealed! Auntie took a deep breath, telling herself not to get angry... she had to maintain her composure in front of others and resist the urge to claw her nephew's face.

The Bronze Gong took a few more reluctant glances at Auntie and Xu Lingyue before walking away.

Xu Qi'an led the three female family members to Chunfeng Hall. Along the way, they encountered many colleagues who warmly greeted Xu Qi'an, with several mistaking Auntie for Xu Qi'an's older sister.

A roundabout compliment about her youth and beauty.

Reaching the side hall of the Chunfeng Hall, he ordered the clerks to serve tea and water, which immediately calmed Auntie's nerves. She laughed and said, "Every Nightwatcher in the office is handsome and speaks so nicely."

Auntie, that sounds a bit odd... Xu Qi'an thought to himself, "I'm going to go wait at the entrance to the constabulary for a moment."

He waited at the entrance for a quarter of an hour before three prefecture office bailiffs and the Zhao couple arrived.

"Sir, the suspects are here," the young bailiff said respectfully, cupping his hands.

"Hmm!"

Xu Qi'an nodded, took the rope, and said, "Wait here, I'll take the suspects to the dungeon and return the rope later."

The Zhao couple was scared out of their wits. In the capital, who didn't know the reputation of the Nightwatchers? More so, everyone knew that the Nightwatchers' dungeon was a place of no return.

Even if one managed to come out, they would be scarred for life, spending the rest of their days in pain.

This was all Nangong Qianrou's doing. He single-handedly created the notorious reputation of the Nightwatchers' dungeon.

Zhao Shen's wife collapsed on the ground, crying and shouting, "I won't go into the Nightwatchers' constabulary. Just kill me, kill me."

This woman was clearly used to throwing tantrums at home. Her nature was hard to change. Even in the Nightwatchers' office, she remained as unreasonable and defiant as ever.

Xu Qi'an's gaze sharpened as he snatched the scabbard from a guard and gave her a hard smack.

Thud... the woman spat out three big teeth, her mouth full of blood. She covered her face, seemingly stunned by the blow.

"If you want to die, it's not difficult. I'll fulfill your wish later," Xu Qi'an sneered. "When you were bullying others, did you ever think you'd end up like this?"

With that, he yanked the rope and dragged the couple into the office.

The three bailiffs remained where they were. One of them suddenly said, "Doesn't that sir look familiar?"

"... Sir Xu? Before constable Lyu was promoted, I worked with her and had seen Sir Xu once. He's changed a lot. I almost didn't recognise him."

"I've seen him too. No wonder he looked familiar. Wasn't he supposed to be dead? Back then, Constable Lyu was in a terrible mood, always lashing out."

.....

Along the way, the Bronze Gongs watched and joked, "What kind of suspects is Sir Xu escorting? They're crying their eyes out."

Xu Qi'an replied, "Two bullies who abused their power. Today, they'll taste the consequences of their actions."

Upon reaching the Nightwatchers' exclusive dungeon, "Clang..." the door opened, and the dark, damp air rushed out.

Zhao Shen's face turned pale, his eyes filled with despair and terror. This was the moment he regretted the most in his life.

He never expected a small matter to lead to such a disaster.

The woman finally broke down, crying, "I pawned the bracelet. I'll pay you back, just don't put me in the dungeon..."

Zhao Shen widened his eyes, looking at his wife. He finally understood the reason for the mysterious man's anger. It turned out his son had been bullying the man's sister repeatedly.

It turned out the bracelet theft was real, and his wife knew everything.

It's over. Caught by the Nightwatchers, even officials with rank would be scared, let alone him. Would his uncle dare to offend the Nightwatchers for his sake?

He regretted not clarifying the matter first, not handling it properly, and relying on his uncle's power to bully some commoners and low-ranking officials.

Zhao Shen burst into tears, muttering, "It's over, it's over..."

Suddenly, he flew into a rage, kicking his wife to the ground and cursing, "It's all your fault, it's all your fault..."

He kicked and cursed, wishing he could divorce her, provided he could get out alive.

The woman wailed loudly.

Xu Qi'an summoned the jailor to imprison the couple, then called for the warden and instructed, "For the couple that was just locked up, show them some colour, but keep to the limits."

"About those limits... do you want them to stay alive or just keep their legs?" the warden asked, feeling troubled.

"... Just keep them alive, but make sure they get a beating every day. Be careful not to break any limbs; I still have use for them. Understand?"

With this, the jailor understood Xu Qi'an only wanted to give them a hard time, and make their stay in prison an unpleasant affair.

That's all? This is the Nightwatchers' prison, after all, the jailor thought. Such a minor matter wouldn't usually warrant imprisonment here.

"This is called 'reform through labour'. As a Nightwatcher, it's my duty to safeguard the capital and serve the Emperor's trust by educating the ignorant."

"You are wise, sir."

After leaving the dungeon, Xu Qi'an spent time chatting with his Auntie and sister in Chunfeng Hall until a black-clad clerk reported that an official claiming to be a Director from the Department of Personnel requested an audience.

This was within Xu Qi'an's expectations. The concept of family lineage in this world was much stronger than in his past life. In the past, if a nephew encountered such troubles, it was uncertain how much an uncle would help.

After all, Xu Qi'an was no ordinary Nightwatcher; he was one holding a gold token.

"Bring him to Chunfeng Hall," Xu Qi'an instructed. He then left the side room and entered Li Yuchun's "office," sitting in his chair.

I should be a Silver Gong soon. With ten Bronze Gong spots available, who should I recruit? One for my Second Uncle, one for Auntie, one for Erlang, one for Lingyue, and oh, Lingyin needs one too. Haha, the whole family can get paid for doing nothing, he mused to himself.

The doorway darkened as a clerk led in an official with a goatee, who was over fifty, dressed in a blue official robe with a silver pheasant embroidered on the chest, and a grey streak in his hair beneath the official hat.

As he stepped into Chunfeng Hall, the usually stern and silent elder official broke into a spring-like smile.

"Sir Xu, I've heard of your great name for a long time. Ah, my humble position has never afforded me the chance to meet you. I've heard you're a frequent guest of the Imperial Study."

Xu Qi'an responded indifferently, "If you wanted to see me, you could have just visited the Jiaofangsi."

Director Zhao was taken aback.

Xu Qi'an laughed heartily, "Lord Zhao, you're easier to tease than the girls at the Jiaofangsi... haha, please sit. Someone, serve tea."

Director Zhao's remarks, seemingly complimentary, actually suggested that Xu Qi'an was troublesome and made many enemies.

Xu Qi'an, on the other hand, compared him to a courtesan.

After this verbal skirmish without any real blows, the clerk served hot tea, and Lord Zhao, after a sip, got straight to the point:

"Sir Xu, may I ask what crime my unworthy nephew has committed?"

"The matter is quite serious!" Xu Qi'an replied with a troubled expression, as if concerned for Director Zhao, "He directed his son to commit acts of extortion and robbery, and after the incident, he gathered servants to plot harm against me and my family."

"Lord Zhao, as colleagues in the court, we should give each other face, but... the law shows no mercy!"

Having navigated the bureaucracy for years, Director Zhao remained composed, even showing a hint of regret: "It's my fault for not keeping him in line, allowing him to act recklessly."

He then pulled out a banknote from his sleeve and placed it on the table, sincerely apologising, "Sir Xu, please be lenient."

Xu Qi'an glanced at it. The amount was a hundred taels. He sighed, "My sister was slightly hurt."

Director Zhao pulled out another note.

Xu Qi'an sighed, "My Auntie was slightly hurt."

Director Zhao pulled out another note.

Xu Qi'an sighed, "My sister was slightly hurt."

"But Sir Xu, your sister was already hurt."

"Oh, I have two sisters."

Director Zhao pulled out another note.

Xu Qi'an sighed, "I was also slightly hurt."

Director Zhao's mouth twitched as he took out another hundred taels.

"The bracelet that was lost was a gift from the Emperor..."

Another note.

Now, five hundred taels lay on the table. Even Director Zhao, with his decades of experience in the officialdom, couldn't help but twitch his mouth.

Xu Qi'an didn't push further, not because he wanted to stop, but because Zhao Shen had earlier extorted five hundred taels. Now, he was merely returning the favor.

"Well, I forgive them," Xu Qi'an carefully collected the banknotes and pocketed them.

"Then... Sir Xu, please release them." Director Zhao breathed a sigh of relief.

"That won't do," Xu Qi'an shook his head.

Director Zhao's face suddenly darkened.

Xu Qi'an took a sip of tea, smiling, "Debts must be repaid, and there's interest too. These five hundred taels are the interest; you haven't paid the principal yet."

Director Zhao stared at him intently, then took a deep breath, "What do you want, Sir Xu?"

He was a powerful Director, in charge of the deployment of officials. This authority was quite significant, determining the fate of government officials across the country.

Apart from the Commanders, the Ministers, and the Censors, the appointment of all other local officials had to pass through the Department of Personnel.

But Xu Qi'an was a unique case.

The Nightwatchers were an institution established to monitor officials, inherently conflicting with his position. Besides, appointments didn't fall under his department. Moreover, this young man was a tough nut to crack.

He had the backing of Wei Yuan and was frequently entrusted by the Emperor with cases. Even the ministers on the court, while secretly spitting at him in their hearts, could do nothing about him.

"It's not a big deal, really. Come, Lord Zhao, have a seat," Xu Qi'an gestured for him to sit and raised his teacup in a toast. When Director Zhao reluctantly sipped his tea, Xu Qi'an asked with a smile:

"I hear the Department of Personnel is in charge of appointing officials?"

Director Zhao nodded.

"In a few days, the Spring Examinations will be held. My cousin, who is exceptionally talented, will undoubtedly pass with flying colours," Xu Qi'an said.

"In that case, what does Sir Xu need from me? You can rest assured," Director Zhao understood his implication.

"Well..." Xu Qi'an chuckled, "He's a disciple of Cloud Deer Academy."

A Cloud Deer Academy disciple?

Director Zhao frowned deeply.

"Don't worry, I won't make things difficult for you. Just ensure that after the Spring Examinations, he's retained in the capital and treated the same as other scholars. I'll be immensely grateful," Xu Qi'an coaxed.

"Your nephew and niece-in-law will naturally be released by then. I won't hold it against them, and as for the Emperor's bracelet, let's just say it was lost."

From the moment Li mentioned that the backing was the Director from the Department of Personnel, Xu Qi'an had this plan in mind.

This was a transaction... Director Zhao pondered for a long time before slowly nodding, "Alright, I hope Sir Xu keeps his promise."

Seeing Director Zhao off, Xu Qi'an exhaled and thought, *Erlang, of all my siblings, you're the one I dote on the most.*

With that, he headed to the Tower of Noble Spirit.

The guard downstairs, seeing Xu Qi'an, said with a hint of resentment and sarcasm, "Sir Xu Qian, you're here again. I heard your big brother came back from the dead?"

Xu Qi'an glanced at him, "Who is Xu Qian? I'm Xu Xinnian. Stop the nonsense and go report."

The guard hurriedly went upstairs and soon returned, saying, "Lord Wei invites you up."

...

Seventh Floor.

Wei Yuan stood before a terrain map, lost in thought. Upon hearing footsteps, he didn't turn around and casually asked, "Did Director Zhao from the Department of Personnel Selection come to see you?"

Coming to the Tower of Noble Spirit was indeed the right decision... Xu Qi'an cupped his hands, "Nothing escapes Lord Wei."

Wei Yuan nodded but still didn't turn around. "What's the matter?"

Xu Qi'an briefly described the course of events, "If nothing unexpected happens, my second brother will be exiled to a desolate place. My second uncle only has one son; how can he be treated like this?"

With a slight smile, Wei Yuan asked, "Why not ask me for help?"

Silence was his response, and Wei Yuan did not press him.

After a long pause, Xu Qi'an frankly replied, "I want to leave a path for the Xu family; he shouldn't be in the same camp as me."

After a pause, he added, "I owe a great debt to Lord Wei, and I will not hesitate to charge forward."

Often, circumstances drive you forward, and by the time you realise it, there's no turning back.

Of course, Xu Qi'an didn't regret it; there was always a price to pay for what you gain. He just felt that having an extra path was beneficial for the future.

A lone minister has no good end!

This sentence from the Crown Prince made Xu Qi'an wary.

A smart person didn't put all their eggs in one basket. Xu Qi'an hoped that among those who could support the Xu family in the future, there would be Xu Xinnian.

Although as a cousin, Xu Xinnian would bear some imprint of him, this could not compare to the relation he had with Wei Yuan.

This little thought was not hidden from Wei Yuan, so the added sentence was to express his stance.

Wei Yuan slowly nodded, "It's only human nature. By the way, you've successfully advanced to the Refining Spirit stage, haven't you? How strong is your primordial spirit?"

"That's hard to say..." Xu Qi'an scratched his head.

"You might as well take Li Yuchun as the standard. He's a veteran at the Refining Spirit stage, still a ways from Bronze Skin and Iron Bones, but his combat strength is solid." Wei Yuan continued staring at the geomantic map.

Xu Qi'an pondered, "I could take on two with a single strike."

Wei Yuan turned around, stunned, "Huh?"

He squinted, staring intently at Xu Qi'an, "What did you say?"

"Lord Wei, after advancing to the Refining Spirit stage, I haven't had a chance to test my strength. I'm not sure where my primordial spirit strength stands within the Refining Spirit stage." Xu Qi'an modestly said.

"Aren't you proficient in the Buddhist Lion's Roar?" Wei Yuan thought for a moment, pointing to the observation deck, "Go out there and give us a shout."

"Lord Wei, the Lion's Roar doesn't discriminate between friend and foe," Xu Qi'an hesitated.

The AoE skill doesn't differentiate between enemies and allies.

"Don't worry about me," Wei Yuan waved his hand.

"Yes sir." Xu Qi'an crossed the tea room and headed for the observation deck. Bathed in warm sunlight, he gathered his breath in his *dantian*.

In his mind, he visualised a golden lion roaring, accompanied by unique breathing and energy circulation techniques. After a brief pause... he let out a deep roar towards the entire Nightwatcher office below.

"Roar!"

This roar didn't sound like an animal cry or a human shout; it was more like a clap of thunder exploding in the Nightwatcher office.

The rolling sound waves raged.

Within the Tower of Noble Spirit, the clerks' eyes rolled back, and they experienced temporary deafness and darkness.

Those further away felt an overwhelming fear upon hearing the roar.

Numerous auras surged from various parts of the office. The Gold Gongs within the premises were all alerted. Figures dashed out of rooms, gathered in the courtyard, leapt onto rooftops, or headed towards the Tower of Noble Spirit.

At this moment, the entire office was on alert.

"Lord, Lord Wei... seems like I've caused too much commotion."

Wei Yuan realised, gazing at the embarrassed-looking Xu Qi'an.

This is a young lion, sharpening its claws and slowly growing its fangs.

He hadn't fully matured yet, but one day, his roar will shake all Jiuzhou.

Chapter 244. Woman's Corpse

Xu Qi'an didn't wait for Wei Yuan's response; instead, he first encountered the Gold Gongs. Powerful presences appeared on the seventh floor, and among them were two familiar faces.

Nangong Qianrou and Zhang Kaitai.

"Duke Wei, are you alright?"

A sturdy and robust Gold Gong, wielding a purple-gold hammer, swept his bell-like eyes around the surroundings as if facing a formidable enemy.

"We failed in our duty, not realising an external enemy had intruded. Please forgive us, Lord Wei."

As Zhang Kaitai spoke, he spread out his spiritual sense to detect any potential dangers or enemies.

Gradually, the experienced Gold Gongs sensed something amiss. First, with their foundation at the Refining Spirit stage, if there were any crises around, their intuition would respond.

But there was none.

The entire Tower of Noble Spirit was peaceful, although the clerks inside were currently in chaos.

Second, if a formidable enemy had invaded and could hide from their senses, Lord Wei would certainly not be unscathed.

Could it be true, as the legends say, that a master lurks in the shadows beside Lord Wei, guarding him?

This speculation arose in the minds of the Gold Gongs. None of them connected it to Xu Qi'an. It was simple; the roar they heard earlier, although not remarkable in terms of spirit strength, was incredibly potent and alarming.

It was definitely not something a newcomer to the Refining Spirit stage could unleash.

At this moment, they heard Nangong Qianrou ask Xu Qi'an, "Was it you causing trouble earlier?"

Nangong Qianrou knew Xu Qi'an was no ordinary Refining Spirit stage practitioner.

Causing trouble? I'm not Ning Caichen... Xu Qi'an looked at Wei Yuan, and seeing him nod, he openly admitted, "It was me. Lord Wei wanted to test my primordial spirit's strength, so I roared a little."

The tea room fell into a brief silence.

The Gold Gongs silently gazed at him, their faces expressionless.

After a long pause, Zhang Kaitai tentatively asked, "Xu Ningyan, you advanced to the Refining Spirit stage in Yunzhou, right?"

As early as when Jiang Lyuzhong's secret letter reached the capital, they learned that Xu Qi'an had advanced to the Refining Spirit stage. At that time, Lord Wei was in an exceptionally good mood.

However, even so, he had only been at the Refining Spirit stage for over half a month, and the intense and pure primordial spirit wave from earlier shouldn't have been from someone at this level.

This talent is truly astonishing.

With that in mind, the Gold Gongs looked at Xu Qi'an as if examining a peculiar artifact.

"I suddenly understand why Jiang Lyuzhong and Yang Yan fought so fiercely for him," a Gold Gong muttered.

A sudden realisation!

The Gold Gongs' gazes grew increasingly fervent.

"Don't get the wrong idea..." Xu Qi'an waved his hand. "I advanced to the Refining Spirit stage at the last moment before death."

This... The Gold Gongs reevaluated him. After a brief silence, they said in unison, "Duke Wei..."

Wei Yuan shook his head, "Xu Qi'an remains under Yang Yan's command. Whoever wants him, go and ask Yang Yan."

"Agreed!"

Except for Nangong Qianrou, the six Gold Gongs responded in unison.

It doesn't matter whose command I'm under, but Gold Gong Yang is going to face the brunt of this... Xu Qi'an hoped Yang Yan would delay his return to the capital, at least until the excitement died down.

Imagine, Yang Gong returning to the capital after a hard-fought campaign to suppress bandits, only to be greeted not with cheers but with the fists of his colleagues. And then there's the backstab from Jiang Lyuzhong once he hears of this.

Zhang Kaitai walked to the lookout hall, looked outside, and helplessly said, "The Nightwatchers and guards are all gathered downstairs."

Wei Yuan said, "Disperse them. This matter stays within us and must not be spread."

"Yes Sir!"

.....

After the guards and Nightwatchers outside dispersed, Xu Qi'an leisurely drank a cup of tea before taking his leave of the Tower of Noble Spirit and returning to Spring Breeze Hall.

Auntie and Xu Lingyue were sitting at the table waiting, with Xu Lingyin curled up in her mother's arms, asleep.

"Big brother, where did you go?" Xu Lingyue approached, her delicate brows furrowed with lingering fear, "Why was there thunder just now? Mother and Lingyin were frightened."

Xu Lingyue, a scheming and somewhat sly sister, had also been scared pale, but in front of her big brother, she wanted to maintain a perfect image.

Cleverly using her sister and mother.

"A sudden clap of thunder on a clear day, it happens often." Xu Qi'an pulled out a hundred taels silver note from his pocket, "The matter is resolved. This is the compensation from the Zhao family. You don't need to worry about this anymore."

Auntie looked at the silver note in disbelief, "For me?"

Xu Qi'an nodded firmly, "Auntie has worked hard for the family. This is what you deserve. Unfortunately, it's only a hundred taels, considering the strong backing they have."

Auntie took the silver note, looked at him, and was a bit moved, saying in a low voice, "Ningyan, I just like to complain. Don't take some of the unpleasant things I say to heart."

"We are family." Xu Qi'an said sincerely.

"Oh, by the way, I have something tonight, so I won't be coming home."

"Something?" Auntie put away the silver note and said, "Since you returned from Yunzhou, you haven't rested at home for a single day. What is it?"

I'm going to develop two mountains and a canyon with someone, investing billions in gold... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

"Big brother didn't come home last night either. It can't be another social gathering tonight." Xu Lingyue was a bit skeptical. Relying on her woman's intuition, she asked:

"Father said big brother likes to go to the Jiaofangsi."

"Shoo, shoo." Auntie spat at her, "Your big brother isn't like that. Erlang might be messing around, but your big brother isn't."

"Then, big brother, swear to me that you've never been to Jiaofangsi." Xu Lingyue pursed her lips, her eyes stubborn.

You, as my sister, where do you get the right to question me... Xu Qi'an solemnly said:

"I, Xu Qi'an, have never spent money in the Jiaofangsi."

Xu Lingyue smiled sweetly, her eyes sparkling.

“Lingyue, when you get home, you can question Erlang like this too.” Xu Qi'an, feeling a bit unbalanced, encouraged her, “I believe Erlang, like me, is also an upright gentleman.”

“Of course, Erlang wouldn't go to Jiaofangsi.” Auntie was full of confidence, thinking that when Xu Pingzhi returned home tonight, she would question him like this and see if he dared to swear.

After seeing off Auntie and his sisters, Xu Qi'an planned to return to Qingyun Hall to retrieve his gold token, but it had been delivered back.

“Sir Xu, the chief constable of the prefectural office, Lyu Qing, requests an audience.” A clerk from Spring Breeze Hall came in to report.

“Invite her inside.” Xu Qi'an turned and reentered Brother Chun's office.

Not long after, as he sat behind the desk, he heard hurried footsteps, as if in pursuit. Immediately afterward, the athletic female constable crossed the threshold and entered the hall.

At the moment she saw Xu Qi'an, Lyu Qing, with her clear and delicate face, was filled with surprise and excitement, and she froze, staring at him in confusion.

Xu Qi'an also looked at his long-unseen friend. Her eyes were bright and lively, her skin was a healthy tan, her nose was high, her eyes were large, her lips were rosy, and her cultivation seemed to have advanced.

Her official bearing was also more imposing than before.

“Constable Lyu, long time no see, how have you been?” Xu Qi'an greeted her with a smile.

“Sir, Sir Xu?” Constable Lu stared intently at Xu Qi'an.

“While in Yunzhou, I took the pill of rebirth, narrowly escaping death, though it changed my appearance,” Xu Qi'an explained.

Lyu Qing nodded, forcing a smile as she took out the gold token from her pocket. “The constables at the constabulary told me about the private school incident. I decided to send constable Zhu back and deliver the gold token personally to Sir Xu. I also wanted to check in on you. I hope you can grant me this small favour.”

As she spoke, Lyu Qing's delicate eyes fixed intently on Xu Qi'an, ready to apologise and leave if she detected any displeasure on his face.

“The token isn't important,” Xu Qi'an tossed the token onto the table and smiled, “It's been a while. Shall we have a drink tonight?”

Lyu Qing shook her head and gently declined, “Sir, I am a woman after all...”

If you were a man, I would have suggested we go to the Jiaofangsi for a drink. Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

The two of them sipped tea and chatted, losing track of time until the distant sound of the watchman's clapper signalled the end of the workday. Lyu Qing suddenly snapped out of her trance, entranced by Xu Qi'an's "charms," and stood up to bid farewell.

"Then I'll take my leave, sir," Lyu Qing cupped her hands and left.

Xu Qi'an escorted her to the gate of the yamen, watching her slender figure disappear. He couldn't help but stroke his chin.

Could it be that Lyu Qing is interested in me? Song Tingfeng said she's still unmarried. Although in this era she's considered an old maid, for me, a woman under thirty is in her prime.

Forget it, Lyu Qing is a respectable woman, different from the girls at the Jiaofangsi. The world of respectable women isn't a place you can just enter and exit as you please. You have to keep going in and out.

This was something Xu Qi'an certainly couldn't do.

...

As the sun set, Xu Qi'an rode his horse leisurely down the wide ancient streets and entered the Jiaofangsi.

Fuxiang was sick, suffering from a cold, lying pale and groggy in bed.

Seeing Xu Qi'an, she was delighted and tried to get up.

This made Xu feel quite guilty for his freeloading. He gently pressed Fuxiang's shoulders, feeling remorseful, and said, "It's my fault for overworking my beauty."

Fuxiang's eyes were half-closed, her voice soft and drowsy, "Any girl in the courtyard, you may choose at your leisure to serve you in my stead."

In the bedroom, three dainty maidservants brightened up instantly.

Xu Qi'an shook his head and declined earnestly, "With you ill, my lady, how could I have the heart for revelry? I will transfer some Qi to you."

He held Fuxiang's wrist and sent a gentle stream of Qi into her.

Qi can unblock the meridians, invigorate the vital organs, and boost the body's resilience. A mere cold would be no match.

Fuxiang coughed violently, her face flushed red.

After a quarter of an hour, her complexion visibly improved.

"Dear master, I feel much better," Fuxiang's eyes sparkled with gratitude as she gazed at him.

The three maidservants were also pleased.

“Madam had taken medicine but showed no improvement. Yet, with Sir Xu’s arrival, her colour instantly brightened. It’s truly comforting to have a man to rely on.”

“Rest well. I’ll come back tomorrow to check on you.” Xu Qi’an pinched her cheek and left the Reflecting Plum Pavilion.

Once he confirmed he had left, Fuxiang opened her eyes and softly said, “You may all leave. No need to stay in the room.”

The three maidservants left in response.

As the bedroom door closed gently, Fuxiang’s previously bright face quickly grew haggard again.

A soft sigh echoed in the bedroom.

...

Xu Qi’an then headed to the Azure Pond Pavillion, where another Oiran, Mingyan, resided.

Mingyan was petite and delicate, a typical southern maiden. Last time, Xu Qi’an had enlightened her on how to “touch her knees while lying down,” which led to a profound exchange, sharing heartfelt stories.

Mingyan was originally from the *Jiangnan* region, south of the river. In her youth, she followed her father, who moved to the capital for a promotion. What they thought was the beginning of their rise ended up in ruin.

The next year, her father, having backed the wrong side, was exiled three thousand miles away and never heard from again. Mingyan was sent to the Jiaofangsi.

“Sir Xu!”

Having been informed by a young pageboy of Xu Qi’an’s visit, Mingyan, dressed in a light blue ornate long dress, adorned with precious jewellery, welcomed him with a vibrant smile.

Upon seeing Xu Qi’an, her smile turned to surprise, nearly mistaking him for someone else.

“A day apart feels like three years,” Xu Qi’an smiled and nodded, “We can talk about my change in appearance later. It’s been over a month since I last saw Mingyan; it feels like a lifetime ago... Ah, it seems our fate spans three lifetimes.”

What a sweet talker... Mingyan’s eyes glistened with joy, her smile growing sweeter, her gaze full of affection.

Sigh, I’m getting better at these irresponsible sweet words... Xu Qi’an felt a pang of guilt.

But a place like the Jiaofangsi was meant for seasoned players to thrive. There was no room for a straight shooter here.

Mingyan led Xu Qi’an inside, speaking in a soft voice, “Why didn’t you stay at the Reflecting Plum Pavilion, Sir?”

As she spoke, she lifted a wine jug with one hand and gathered her sleeves with the other, pouring Xu Qi’an a drink.

"Because I missed you, Mingyan," Xu Qi'an answered sincerely.

Mingyan, delighted, turned to her maidservants and instructed, "Close the courtyard gates. We won't be holding any tea gatherings tonight."

She nestled against Xu Qi'an, lifting her bright, delicate face, staring at him with admiration. Having not seen him for over a month, Xu Qi'an's transformation was astounding.

If she was initially drawn to his talent, now Mingyan was quite tempted by his charm.

Xu Qi'an recounted the events in Yunzhou, speaking with confidence and eloquence:

"...At the time, eight thousand rebels besieged the Yunzhou Administration. Shadows of people were everywhere, and the Provincial Governor was trapped inside, his life hanging by a thread.

"Having no other choice, I stood alone with a blade, facing eight thousand rebels. One came, I struck one; two came, I struck a pair. Who can stand firm with a blade? I believe it's only me, Xu Qi'an.

"I fought for half an hour without blinking. Finally, reinforcements arrived."

As they conversed, they moved from the hall to the bedroom, then to the bath, and eventually to the bed.

"Sir, didn't you promise to watch me dance?" Mingyan pouted, playfully.

"Then, how about a Latin dance?"

In Azure Pond Pavillion, Mingyan's bed swayed till the wee hours.

...

The next day, a rejuvenated Xu Qi'an left Azure Pond Pavillion, riding his horse to the palace.

From a distance, he spotted the eunuch tasked with supervising him, pacing anxiously near the palace gate.

"Hey, little eunuch, you seem quite polite today."

Xu Qi'an teased from atop his horse.

"Sir, you're finally here!" The little eunuch hurriedly approached, speaking as he walked, "Something happened last night. They found a woman's body in the well."

Chapter 245. Huang Xiaorou

"A woman's body?"

The urgency in the eunuch's voice as he waited anxiously at the palace gate indicated something serious had happened. Considering that the only connection between him and the eunuch was the case of Consort Fu, the body likely had something to do with that.

Squinting his eyes, Xu Qi'an speculated, "Is it the missing palace maid from the Consort Fu case?"

The eunuch was taken aback, then quickly expressed his admiration, "Sir, you truly have divine foresight. This servant is utterly in awe."

The words were both flattery and sincere praise. After observing Xu Qi'an over the past two days, the eunuch had come to realise that despite his outwardly flamboyant demeanour, Xu Qi'an was a brilliant and perceptive detective.

This isn't divine foresight, just simple deduction... Xu Qi'an nodded, "Take me to see the body."

The little eunuch promptly led the way.

"Which well was the body found in?"

"In the courtyard behind Xie Pavilion."

"Xie Pavilion?"[^1]

What sort of name is that... Xu Qi'an mused.

"Xie Pavilion is where the palace maids reside," the eunuch explained.

Palace maids were also divided into different ranks. The higher-ranking ones were known as female officials and even have official titles and ranks, such as *Jieyu, Meiren, Cairen, Yunu, Cainu,* and so on.

These palace maids might hope for the Emperor's favour and a rise in status. However, during the reign of Emperor Yuanjing, none of them had such luck.

The next rank included those who served the consorts.

The lowest rank were the ones who lived in large dormitories, doing menial tasks.

Xie Pavilion was one such dormitory.

Talking as they walked, they soon arrived at the mortuary within the palace grounds, a secluded courtyard in the south used for storing the bodies of those who died from execution, illness, or accidents.

On a simple wooden slab lay a corpse, slightly bloated from being submerged in water.

"Fetch me some tools. I need to perform an autopsy," Xu Qi'an ordered.

He was somewhat eager at the prospect. In his previous life working at the police station, he often observed and assisted the coroner in autopsies, gaining a lot of professional knowledge and experience.

From initial fear and nausea, he gradually became accustomed to it, eventually becoming unfazed while assisting. Xu Qi'an had come to realise he rather enjoyed the process.

Since coming to this world, he had encountered numerous cases, but opportunities for autopsies were rare.

"Consort Fu is off-limits, but I can certainly dissect this little palace maid... If only it were fresher," he mused while unbuttoning the palace maid's clothing.

"Running dog, running dog, why didn't you inform me you were entering the palace..."

Princess Lin'an's cheerful voice rang out from outside, followed by a flash of red as she rushed to the door.

"What are you doing?"

Lin'an's smile froze when she saw Xu Qi'an holding the deceased maid's undergarments.

Behind her, Princess Huaiqing, dressed in a white gown, gracefully stepped over the threshold. She glanced at Xu Qi'an, then at the undergarments in his hand.

This is awkward... Xu Qi'an remained calm. "Examining the body, preparing for an autopsy."

"Don't touch such disgusting things!" Lin'an stomped her feet in frustration, quickly averting her gaze from the maid's exposed upper body.

Huaiqing shared the same sentiment and offered a suggestion, "Why not have the coroner do it?"

Because I enjoy it... Xu Qi'an shook his head solemnly and explained earnestly, "Your Highnesses, you know your servant always handles matters personally and meticulously. Where others see diligence, your servant sees nothing but ordinary duty. In truth, it's no big deal."

Lin'an was impressed by Xu Qi'an's work ethic. Huaiqing, however, remained expressionless, seemingly unconvinced.

"I suggest the two highnesses return to have some tea and wait outside. It won't take long," Xu Qi'an tried to usher them out.

Huaiqing did not leave. Instead, she gracefully stepped forward to examine the corpse.

"The body was retrieved last night. It was identified as Huang Xiaorou, and was then taken away by Eunuch Chang," Huaiqing said.

"I want to stay and observe. Perhaps there are clues to be found in the body."

Huaiqing seemed to have a strong interest in intellectual tasks—playing chess, compiling histories, and now solving cases... Xu Qi'an turned and quietly observed her clear, bright eyes.

Sensing his gaze, Huaiqing slightly narrowed her eyes and met his, her voice as crisp as clinking ice, "Hmm?"

With just a single "Hmm," she conveyed: *Little brother, do you have an issue?*

Xu Qi'an quickly looked away, avoiding Huaiqing's flawless face, and turned to Lin'an. "What about you, Your Highness?"

Lin'an glanced at Huaiqing, hesitated, and then said, "There's nothing to it. I'll stay as well."

"Alright then!"

Xu Qi'an promptly stripped the corpse completely.

Lin'an's face flushed bright red, then turned pale. She covered her face and fled.

"Your Highness, aren't you staying to watch?" Xu Qi'an called out.

With her face still covered, Lin'an murmured, "I'm leaving, I'm leaving..."

Huaiqing glanced at the corpse. Although she hid it well, Xu Qi'an still caught a flicker of embarrassment in her clear, deep eyes.

It was a similar kind of embarrassment to what Xu Qi'an had felt when watching TV with his parents in the past, only for the show to cut to an intimate scene...

A perfect appearance and top-tier configuration, but almost zero mileage... Xu Qi'an mentally evaluated.

If Huaiqing were a top-class sports car, fresh off the line...

Then Lin'an would be a model car: dazzling on the outside, but with an engine that leaves much to be desired...

But for most men, it's the coquettish, inwardly alluring, and not-too-bright women like Lin'an who were more attractive.

"What's this?"

Huaiqing discovered a strip of dull yellow silk in the palace maid Huang Xiaorou's personal belongings. Embroidered on it was a vivid red lotus flower and a line of small characters:

"The spring of the thirty-first year of Yuanjing."

"Keeping this close even in death suggests it was something very important to her."

Huaiqing looked at Xu Qi'an, as if seeking confirmation. "What do you think, Sir Xu?"

Xu Qi'an simply replied, "Hmm."

Huaiqing's lips curved into a faint smile.

"Your Highness is so clever—why don't you take a look at this body and see what you can discern?"

Huaiqing glanced at him, seeing that Xu Qi'an was clearly testing her, which made her suppress her smile and brought out a competitive streak.

"Judging by the degree of pallor and swelling, she wasn't thrown into the well right after the incident," Huaiqing deduced.

"Within two days," Xu Qi'an provided a more precise answer.

"There are no obvious external injuries on her body, so she probably drowned, possibly after being knocked unconscious." After speaking, the elegant and refined princess subconsciously looked at Xu Qi'an.

Seeing that his face remained expressionless and he offered no comment, the princess felt a bit displeased and subtly pouted when she lowered her head.

"Is there anything else?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Huaiqing thought for a moment and then slightly shook her head.

“You missed the most important step. Normally, when examining a female corpse, even if the cause of death seems clear, you should never forget to check...”

Xu Qi'an raised an eyebrow at Huaiqing, giving her a mischievous grin.

Huaiqing was momentarily puzzled, then saw Xu Qi'an's gaze drift toward a forbidden area. Being as astute as she was, she immediately understood.

Whoosh...

Her fair face instantly turned red as she furrowed her brows and gritted her teeth. “Xu Ningyan, how dare you tease me!”

Xu Qi'an quickly apologised, his tone sincere. “Your servant had no intention of offending you, Your Highness. Please forgive me.”

Huaiqing turned aside, indicating she was not accepting his apology, clearly upset.

Teasing a proud and aloof princess feels much more satisfying than teasing Lin'an... Huaiqing's anger has a unique charm... Xu Qi'an coughed lightly and continued:

“She did drown, but not in the well. She was suffocated by being forcibly held underwater.”

“How can you tell?” Huaiqing doubted his words and turned back to question him.

Hmm, it seems that discussing academic matters can temporarily quell her anger... Even female scholars have their weaknesses... Xu Qi'an silently noted, maintaining a composed expression as he explained:

“Look at her face, it's purplish-red. A typical drowning victim's face would be pale and swollen. Only when someone is held underwater, with their head facing down, does the blood flow back to the head, causing the face to become engorged.”

Huaiqing furrowed her brows in thought.

“And another thing,” Xu Qi'an said, lifting the corpse's wrist. “Look at her hand, clenched into a fist, which is typical of drowning victims. But if you examine closely, there's no sand or algae under her nails.”

Huaiqing leaned in to observe and saw that the nails were indeed clean.

“This indicates she was drowned, but not in the well?” she asked.

“Your Highness is exceptionally wise. Compared to you, Princess Lin'an is just a younger sister,” Xu Qi'an complimented, cupping his hands in admiration.

Though she knew he was flattering her, Huaiqing still felt pleased.

People enjoy hearing praise, even sages. And Huaiqing, being proud, might outwardly dismiss flattery but secretly revel in it. She gave a reserved “hmm” in response.

“So, she was silenced,” the princess then added.

Xu Qi'an nodded, just as he heard the faint sound of footsteps. He looked toward the doorway and saw a little eunuch hurriedly approaching with the tools for dissecting the corpse.

The eunuch rushed into the room, and his first reaction upon seeing the corpse was to let out a sharp "Ah~"

"Never seen a woman before, little eunuch? Come, let me give you a lesson in human anatomy," Xu Qi'an teased in a rascal tone.

The eunuch, embarrassed, lowered his head and placed the tools on a long table.

There were six knives in total, varying in size and thickness, wrapped in thick burlap.

Xu Qi'an wanted to lick his lips to show his anticipation, but he felt that would be too indecent in front of Huaiqing, so he restrained himself.

Honestly, I don't like being watched when I'm indulging in my little hobbies... He selected a single-edged knife, about the size of a dagger, and placed the tip at the corpse's throat, slicing open the windpipe.

A slightly murky liquid flowed out.

"Ugh..."

The pink flesh exposed to view made the little eunuch cover his mouth, unable to stop dry heaving.

Xu Qi'an then switched to a larger knife and cut open the chest, revealing the lungs...

"Ugh..." The little eunuch fled the room.

Can't handle this? Guess teaching anatomy to eunuchs really is a futile effort.

Huaiqing's otherwise serene, jade-like face showed a vivid expression of shock and disgust. Her eyelashes fluttered as she averted her gaze.

"The lungs are also filled with water. The cause of death is confirmed—she drowned," Xu Qi'an said, setting the knife down.

Huaiqing nodded, asking, "Is there anything else to check?"

"No, Your Highness, we can leave now," Xu Qi'an said, but then suddenly let out a "Huh?"

Huaiqing, who had already turned to leave, looked back. Seeing what Xu Qi'an was doing, she suddenly frowned. "What are you doing?"

Xu Qi'an appeared to be fiddling with the left breast of the female corpse, at least in Huaiqing's eyes.

"She was injured," Xu Qi'an frowned as he spoke, lifting the breast to reveal what lay beneath for Huaiqing to see.

Huaiqing was momentarily stunned.

This palace maid, named Huang Xiaorou, had a deep scar beneath her left breast, directly over her heart.

Huaiqing immediately realised she had wrongly accused Xu Qi'an and understood his concern:

How did a palace maid suffer such a dangerous injury? The strangest part was that she had survived it.

Xu Qi'an spread out the rough burlap again, picked up the largest knife, and sliced open the woman's chest along the scar.

Huaiqing looked like she wanted to watch but was hesitant due to the gruesome nature of the scene.

Xu Qi'an removed the heart, squinting as he examined it for a moment before considerably explaining, "Judging by the scar, the wound was deep, likely caused by scissors or another sharp object. It penetrated the heart, and she should have died from massive blood loss."

Huaiqing nodded, her gaze shifting to the outside as she analyzed, "The medicine capable of healing such a wound would only be accessible to the Empress or consorts of high rank.

"Anyone else who needed such a life-saving pill would require the Empress's permission, or they must have been directly rewarded by the Emperor, so there's no need to requisition from the imperial storehouse."

Naturally, when she mentioned "anyone else," she didn't include princes or princesses.

As they left the mortuary, there was a well in the courtyard. Xu Qi'an drew a bucket of water and carefully washed his hands.

Afterward, he vigorously scrubbed the yellow silk he found on the corpse and spread it out to dry by the well.

"Notify the attendant in charge of the morgue that the body inside is still needed and should be sent to the icehouse," Xu Qi'an ordered the young eunuch.

"Xu Ningyan, help me fetch a bucket of water," Princess Huaiqing stood nearby, her tone delicate and reserved.

Based on how she addressed him, Xu Qi'an could tell that her mood was relatively good. When she was formal and distant, she would call him Sir Xu. When she was angry, it was always Xu Ningyan.

Since her tone now didn't carry anger, this "Xu Ningyan" sounded more like a friend's address.

Xu Qi'an fetched a bucket of water for her. Huaiqing squatted down, rolled up her sleeves, and dipped her fair, slender hands into the water, her long, jade-like fingers gracefully moving.

Such beautiful hands... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

After soaking her hands, Huaiqing took out a silk handkerchief to dry them. "I'll take you to the Imperial Pharmacy," she said.

Xu Qi'an was about to nod in agreement when a thought suddenly crossed his mind: *Why was the body thrown into the well at Xie Pavilion?*

There were many other wells in the palace, some in more hidden places, like the Cold Palace or the morgue's well.

"We should go to the Xie Pavillion well first."

From a distance, Princess Lin'an saw the two of them emerge and walked over with a spring in her step. "Did you find anything?" she asked.

"We did make some discoveries," Xu Qi'an replied, recounting the findings from the autopsy. Lin'an nodded as she listened, but it was clear that she lost interest as soon as he finished speaking.

Lin'an pointed to the pale yellow silk drying by the well and exclaimed, "Running Dog, doesn't the lotus pattern on this look like..."

Before she could finish, Xu Qi'an suddenly let out a loud cry, clutching his head and rolling on the ground in pain.

Both Lin'an and Huaiking were startled, rushing to his side. "What's wrong?" they asked urgently.

"My head... it hurts so much..." Xu Qi'an groaned in pain, holding his head tightly, even letting his mink hat fall off to reveal his bald head, which showed he was indeed in severe pain.

"Stay here; I'll fetch the imperial physician immediately," Lin'an said anxiously. She turned and quickly ran off, her waist swaying as she went.

Seeing her annoying younger sister leave, Huaiking finally dropped her regal demeanor and knelt down beside Xu Qi'an, feeling his pulse. "We know a bit about medicine..." she began.

As soon as she touched his pulse, she felt it racing, confirming that Xu Qi'an's heart was indeed beating rapidly.

"Your Highness..." Xu Qi'an grabbed Huaiking's soft hand, speaking in a pained voice, "Ever since your servant entered the Refining Spirit stage, I've been plagued by these headaches. Duke Wei said it's due to agitation of the primordial spirit, and that I might die from the soul leaving the body at any moment."

Huaiking was shocked. She hadn't known about this, so she didn't immediately withdraw her hand.

When Lin'an returned after instructing the guards to fetch the imperial physician, she found Xu Qi'an calmly brushing off the dust from his clothes, while Huaiking was washing her hands by the bucket.

"You're fine now?" Lin'an asked, puzzled.

"I'm fine; it was just a sudden pain that subsided quickly," Xu Qi'an replied, waving his hand tiredly.

Phew... That was a close call. Fortunately, I reacted quickly. If these sisters found out I wrote them the same love letter and gave them identical lotus petals, Huaiking would never tolerate it, and neither would Lin'an... Their favorability towards me would plummet... Xu Qi'an praised himself inwardly for his quick thinking, not only stabilising the situation but also managing to hold Huaiking's hand... He silently congratulated himself.

Huaiking kept her head down, not saying a word, her hand still red from the pressure, as if it still held Xu Qi'an's warmth.

Biaobiao eyed him suspiciously.

...

Xie Pavillion was located on the west side of the palace, far from the residences of the consorts, in a large *siheyuan*.

At this time of day, the palace maids had already left Xie Pavillion to attend to their duties elsewhere in the palace. Only an old nanny, the overseer, was lying in a large chair, basking in the early spring sun.

The age spots on her face were clearly visible in the sunlight. Her body had become plump and out of shape, her hair gray, simply pinned up with a jade hairpin.

"Nanny Rong, Nanny Rong..." The young eunuch called out a few times, waking the old nanny from her light sleep.

Nanny Rong?!

Xu Qi'an's childhood memories were suddenly stirred, and he couldn't help but think of a famous line: *"Your Majesty, do you still remember Nanny Rong by the banks of Lake Daming?"*

"Her Highnesses are here," the eunuch announced.

Nanny Rong blinked her eyes to focus and indeed saw the two most beautiful princesses in the palace, visiting together.

She got up with surprising agility for her age, bowing deeply as she greeted them. "This old servant greets Your Highnesses."

Huaiqing looked at her and said, "I'm here to assist Sir Xu in investigating a case. It concerns the female corpse pulled from the well today. Tell us everything you know."

Nanny Rong nodded in agreement.

Seeing this, Xu Qi'an spoke up, "Who discovered the body, and when?"

"It was Xiaoyu who found it. Early this morning, she went to the well to fetch water and noticed something wrong with the sound of the bucket hitting the water—it sounded dull. She looked into the well for a long time and, oh my, it turned out to be a corpse," the old nanny explained, her expression animated.

Xu Qi'an pointed to the stone well under the locust tree. "That one?"

"Yes."

He walked to the well and looked down. The well was deep, and the view was dim, with the water surface reflecting like a mirror.

With ordinary eyesight, it would indeed take a long time to notice a corpse in such a dark well.

"No one noticed anything yesterday?" Xu Qi'an frowned.

The palace maid Huang Xiaorou's body had clearly been in the water for more than 24 hours.

"That's the annoying part. When the body was found this morning, those silly girls said they had noticed something odd about the sound when drawing water the day before..." The old nanny was infuriated at the memory, cursing, "None of them had the sense to check, and they let this old woman drink corpse water for two days."

Biaobiao made a face of disgust.

Xu Qi'an's eye twitched. "Nanny, do you know a maid named Huang Xiaorou?"

The old nanny was momentarily stunned. "Huang who?"

"Huang Xiaorou," Xu Qi'an repeated.

The nanny widened her eyes. "Who Xiaorou?"

Xu Qi'an snapped, "I'm not asking about Ma Dongmei; there's no need for you to respond like that."

The nanny thought for a long time before suddenly realising, "Oh, this old servant was just making sure. Yes, I know Huang Xiaorou, I know her."

Huaiqing's eyes lit up as she realised why Xu Qi'an had come to the Xie Pavillion well.

This little Bronze Gong really has a sharp mind, turning so quickly.

"You know her?" Xu Qi'an prompted, "She was a maidservant of Consort Fu. How is it possible that you would know her?"

Chapter 246. Daoist Jinlian: Let Xu Qi'an Deal With It

"The old servant does indeed recognise her. Xiaorou used to work at Xie Pavillion. Three years ago, when Chunfeng Palace needed more maids, I noticed that she was both pretty and quick with her hands, so I recommended her for the position..."

"When the body was pulled out, didn't you go to take a look?" Xu Qi'an suddenly asked.

"How could I dare? This old servant is too old to handle the sight of the dead."

"Oh. Continue telling us about this Huang Xiaorou."

Perhaps due to her age, Nanny Rong's emotions were rather volatile. She suddenly became angry: "That ungrateful girl! If it weren't for this old servant's recommendation, how could she have become one of Consort Fu's head maids? After all these years, she never even came back to visit me.

"Even those uncultured men still remember to show respect to their godfathers. Hmph, when women are heartless, nothing is more chilling."

"Nanny, please don't say that. You're too old to dodge the crafty attacks of a boxer." Xu Qi'an joked, then asked, "During the autopsy, I discovered that Huang Xiaorou had a fatal wound on her left chest. Do you know anything about that?"

Nanny Rong thought for a while, her expression one of deep recollection: "A wound... There was indeed such a thing. I think it happened the year before she was transferred to Chunfeng Palace. For some reason, she got up in the middle of the night and stabbed her own chest with a pair of scissors.

"Fortunately, the maid who shared a room with her discovered it early, called for the imperial physician, and saved her life."

Xu Qi'an and Princess Huaqing frowned simultaneously.

There was a flaw in Nanny Rong's story. The scar Xu Qi'an saw reached the heart and was clearly a fatal wound. The cost of treating such an injury would have been far beyond what a maid could afford.

"As the saying goes, those who survive a great disaster are destined for good fortune. Xiaorou was lucky to escape death, and the next year she was transferred to Chunfeng Palace, no longer having to do menial tasks. She was very beautiful and had a chance of being favoured by the Emperor, you know."

Xu Qi'an recalled Huang Xiaorou's swollen face after her death, and his lips twitched.

Whoever saved Huang Xiaorou, one thing was clear—under such massive blood loss, she would not have had much time left. Whoever it was that saved her must have been watching her closely.

If Nanny Rong was telling the truth, then the issue must be with...

"What was the name of that maid?" Princess Huaqing asked the question before Xu Qi'an could, adding, "The one who shared a room with Huang Xiaorou."

"Your Highness, let me think..." Nanny Rong said, pondering for a while before she responded uncertainly, "I think her name was... He'er?"

It was obvious to Xu Qi'an that Princess Huaqing's pupils suddenly contracted.

She recognises this maid named He'er... Xu Qi'an concluded silently.

"I've finished my questions. Do either of Your Highnesses have anything to add?" Xu Qi'an turned to look at Princess Huaqing and Princess Lin'an.

Lin'an shook her head cooperatively, while Huaqing seemed lost in thought, not responding.

Just as Xu Qi'an was about to leave and proceed to the Imperial Pharmacy, Nanny Rong suddenly said, "Sir, this old servant has something to say to you."

Saying this, she got up and walked a few steps away.

Xu Qi'an followed her. Nanny Rong gazed at the distant figures of Princess Huaqing and the others, then looked back at Xu Qi'an with a solemn expression and said:

"Sir, there are too many secrets buried deep within the inner palace. Once you set foot in it, you'll keep sinking deeper."

"Nanny, you're so simple-minded, like a firefly in the night. Your grey hair, the age spots on your face, and your large belly have all deeply impressed me." Xu Qi'an praised her.

Go on, tell me all your secrets.

"Sir has such a sweet tongue. It's only because you're so handsome that I'm telling you this." Nanny Rong slowly returned to her recliner and stopped speaking.

Xu Qi'an didn't move, surprised. "That's it?"

Nanny Rong shook her head. "This old servant knows very little. The secrets of the inner palace are not something one should know."

... Heh, this old woman! Wasting my time! I thought she had something significant to reveal.

In Xu Qi'an's mind, if Nanny Rong had called him aside, there had to be some "unspeakable secret" waiting for him.

But it turned out to be just a word of caution!

As they left the courtyard of Xie Pavillion, Xu Qi'an noticed that the vibrant red-robed Princess Lin'an was still waiting outside, but Princess Huaiqing was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is the Eldest Princess?"

Lin'an immediately looked displeased, raising her eyebrows, "It's always Huaiqing, Huaiqing! Have you forgotten who you are? I'm standing right here, and you pretend not to see me."

In the sunlight, her round, delicate face had a soft glow, her cheeks a rosy hue, like a piece of flawless jade without a blemish.

Her raised eyebrows and the discontent in her charming peach blossom eyes only added to her adorableness.

Even when she was angry, she was more cute than anything.

"I'm glad the Eldest Princess has left. Now we can be alone together," Xu Qi'an said cheerfully.

Lin'an's face turned slightly red as she glanced nervously at the nearby guards. In a low voice, she said, "Running Dog, don't talk to me like that."

As an unmarried princess, she wasn't used to such sweet-talking and felt both shy and flustered whenever she heard such flirtations.

"Your Highness, you're too modest. You're like a light in the darkness, so radiant that even the sun can't outshine your brilliance..." Xu Qi'an switched to a different metaphorical expression, once again using it on Princess Lin'an.

Lin'an was both delighted and embarrassed, a bit helpless as well. She didn't know when it had started, but she gradually found herself unable to control this little Bronze Gong.

When she had first taken him from Huaiqing, he was obedient and swore to sever ties with Huaiqing, vowing to be her loyal servant.

But over time, she realised that she couldn't keep this man in check. Although he appeared humble and respectful, whenever they were alone, she always ended up on the back foot.

And yet, somehow, she never seemed to mind this dynamic. Even in front of Huaiqing, she had always been a competitive woman.

Thinking of this, Lin'an raised her beautifully curved chin and questioned him, "Why didn't you say that when Huaiqing was around?"

How could I say the same thing in front of both of you...? If it were Huaiking, I'd have to change my approach: 'Your Highness, you're like a pure white snow lotus blooming in the cold wind. Your peerless beauty, your long and graceful legs, and your impressive 36D chest... have all deeply moved me.'

Xu Qi'an changed the subject, "Where did the Eldest Princess go?"

"How should we know?" Lin'an replied.

Biaobiao seemed like she wanted to roll her eyes, but mindful of her etiquette, she forced herself to hold back and said, "We should hurry to the Imperial Pharmacy; solving a case is like putting out a fire, there's no time to waste."

Xu Qi'an looked at her and speculated, "Are you worried that Huaiking might destroy the evidence?"

Biaobiao pretended not to hear, walking ahead with light steps, the sway of her skirt occasionally revealing the peach-like shape of her hips.

When God spread wisdom across the earth, this princess, like Lingyin, was clever enough to use an umbrella... Dealing with her is indeed simpler and easier than dealing with Huaiking... But she's just so devious, it's hard to guard against. Xu Qi'an muttered internally as he accompanied the princess to the Imperial Pharmacy.

...

Lingbao Temple.

In a tranquil room filled with the scent of sandalwood, two women of extraordinary status were sitting across from each other, drinking tea. Sunlight filtered through the lattice windows, casting neat square patches of light on the floor. Dust motes danced in the beams.

Luo Yuheng sat on a meditation cushion backed by the character "Dao," holding a *fuchen* in one hand and a teacup in the other. She took a sip, her beautiful eyes narrowing in enjoyment, highlighting her long, thick lashes.

"Tea grown by Nanzhi is truly different from ordinary varieties. If I could drink a pot of this every day, I wouldn't want to be a celestial being," Luo Yuheng sighed.

The woman sitting opposite Daoist Luo wore a complex dark blue gown and ornate headgear, her face hidden behind a light veil. Only the contours of her cheeks were faintly visible, with just her clear, bright eyes and finely shaped eyebrows exposed.

"This tea matures every three years, and only yields three pounds. Most of it is tribute to the palace," the veiled woman said in a soft, seductive voice, rich with the magnetism of a mature woman.

She lifted her veil slightly, took a sip, and then asked, "Has anything interesting happened in the capital lately?"

Luo Yuheng sighed helplessly, "You're not interested in court struggles, but aren't they the most thrilling and captivating? As for cases, from the tax silver case to the Sangpo case, you've heard about them several times... This is the capital, how many cases can I tell you about?"

"Hasn't Consort Fu's case yet to be concluded?" The veiled woman's eyes curved slightly, as if smiling.

"That case is still being handled by that Bronze Gong. I don't know the details," Luo Yuheng downed her tea in one gulp and poured herself another cup. "After all, it's the Emperor's family matter. If you're interested, you can ask Princess Huaiqing."

"Forget it, I don't feel like dealing with the royal family," the woman shook her head and then added, "I've seen that Bronze Gong twice. He's rather annoying."

"You've met him?" Luo Yuheng was taken aback.

The veiled woman made a sound of acknowledgment, dipped her jade-like finger in the tea, and drew a pig's head on the table, her eyes curving again as she hummed, "He took my sachet and wouldn't return it."

Luo Yuheng nodded, following the topic, "That person is not ordinary. He is highly regarded and nurtured by Wei Yuan. Given time, another high-ranking martial artist will rise in the Great Feng, with boundless potential."

Under the veil, the woman curled her lips dismissively and said, "How high can he rise? With the Zhenbei King around, no martial artist in Great Feng can truly lift their heads. He's just a Bronze Gong, after all."

Luo Yuheng smiled slightly. That Bronze Gong was indeed talented, and with Wei Yuan's appreciation and being chosen by the Earth Sect as a holder of the Earth Book, he was among the more outstanding heroes of the world. Still, he was just one of many exceptional individuals.

"I do admire his ability to solve cases. So many major cases, with their twists and turns, the process is quite interesting," the veiled woman said.

Luo Yuheng was about to reply when her cheeks suddenly flushed with a layer of intoxicating red. She frowned, put down her teacup, and whispered, "Nanzhi, you should leave now..."

The veiled woman looked at her, nodded slightly, stood up, and walked to the door. Just before leaving, she turned back and said helplessly, "If it becomes unbearable, just submit to Emperor Yuanjing. Or find a man; if this monthly fire continues to torment you, I'm really afraid you'll turn into a nymphomaniac."

Luo Yuheng ignored her, her frown deepening.

The veiled woman opened the door of the tranquil room, stepped onto the eaves, and followed the stone path out of the courtyard.

"Whew..."

Luo Yuheng exhaled a scorching breath, bracing herself against the table as she stood up. When her full chest brushed against the edge, she let out an irresistibly seductive moan, her legs weakening as she nearly collapsed.

She stumbled out of the tranquil room, her exquisite face flushed, her eyes glistening with desire, irresistibly beautiful.

Splash...

Luo Yuheng leaped into the small pond in the backyard.

The icy water engulfed the mature and voluptuous body of the stunning Daoist. Moments later, there was a series of crackling sounds as a thick layer of ice formed on the pond's surface.

The chill spread to the surrounding rockery and pavilion, coating them with a thin, transparent layer of frost.

After a quarter of an hour, the ice began to melt, wisps of steam rising from the water. Then, bubbles began to churn and burst on the surface with a "pop."

Gurgle, gurgle...

More and more bubbles boiled up, the steam thickening until the entire pond seemed to be boiling.

This process continued for a full half hour. The water level dropped by several inches, and when the pond finally calmed down, warm, humid air lingered over the backyard for a long time.

Luo Yuheng emerged from the water, her hairpin dislodged, letting her dark hair cling to her fair cheeks. Her eyes were still misty, her face flushed as if intoxicated, incredibly alluring.

"Meow~"

A soft meow sounded as an orange cat gracefully leaped over the courtyard wall, its movements agile as it perched on the rockery behind Luo Yuheng.

"This evil fire will destroy your Dao foundation, Luo Yuheng. At most, you can endure for another three years," the orange cat spoke in a warm, ancient voice.

"Why has Senior Brother come?" Luo Yuheng asked, half-closing her starry eyes as she soaked in the water.

"Let me offer you some advice," the orange cat said. "The Sitianjian has a pill called the Rebirth Pill that can alleviate your symptoms. Right now, you're dealing with lust, but soon, you'll have to face greed, anger, ignorance, and hatred... It won't be easy for you."

"Sigh, of the three Daoist sects, only the Heaven Sect is free from the burdens of worldly affairs. Perhaps the Heaven Sect's philosophy is the correct one."

Luo Yuheng opened her eyes and sneered, "The Heaven Sect is heartless and merciless, assimilating with heaven and earth, devoid of joy, sorrow, love, or hate. Even if one ascends to immortality, they lose their self in the process. That is heresy."

She paused, frowning slightly. "Of course I know the Rebirth Pill can ease my symptoms, but the Jianzheng has never liked my Human Sect, and he would never give me such a pill."

The orange cat spoke unhurriedly, "Xu Qi'an has taken the Rebirth Pill, and its effects have not yet dissipated. A bowl of his vital blood could be used as a medicinal guide. Although the resulting pill would not be as potent as the Rebirth Pill, it could at least solve your immediate problem."

"He would be willing to do this small favor for a poor Daoist like me."

Luo Yuheng was silent for a moment before she retorted, "You should focus on yourself. The demonic aspect you split off has claimed most of your power. With just your remaining soul, trying to destroy the demon is nothing but wishful thinking."

The orange cat chuckled, "When the time comes, I will need my junior sister's help, of course. But by the time I am confident enough to subdue the demon, the holders of the Earth Book fragments will likely have grown strong. All you'll need to do is stand by as support."

Luo Yuheng frowned, "Senior brother should know that unless I reach the first rank, in my current state, if I get entangled in karma, it will most likely lead to my demise."

"That is why I will assist you in reaching the first rank."

Luo Yuheng turned her head sharply, her beautiful eyes burning as she stared intently at the orange cat, saying nothing.

"Why don't you practice dual cultivation with Emperor Yuanjing?" the orange cat suggested, raising a paw as if to lick it, but then stopping, reason winning over instinct.

"His fortune isn't sufficient," Luo Yuheng replied.

For the first time, she revealed why she refused to practice dual cultivation with Emperor Yuanjing.

The orange cat nodded slowly, then frowned, "So you're only using his fortune to suppress your karmic fire without going further. And after that? Surely you have a plan for the future?"

Luo Yuheng nodded, "I will wait for the new emperor to ascend."

The orange cat understood, but then hesitated, "Given the current weakened state of the Great Feng, each generation is likely to be worse than the last. None of Emperor Yuanjing's heirs has the potential to revitalise the empire, and you know this better than I do."

Luo Yuheng smiled, "Revitalisation doesn't necessarily depend on the monarch. With someone like Wei Yuan, the empire's patcher, as long as he survives the purge and controls the new emperor after Emperor Yuanjing's death, the empire will eventually recover and flourish."

"So, you plan to wait until the national strength is restored before practicing dual cultivation with the new emperor...," the orange cat mused, nodding at first but then shaking its head. "There is no rush for that. The reasons behind the Great Feng's decline are complex, with implications so vast that they are terrifying to contemplate."

Luo Yuheng frowned, "In terms of strategy, senior brother, you're no less capable than Wei Yuan."

"This Poor Daoist is just speculating; things are still unclear," the orange cat said, then added, "By the way, Li Miaozen is coming to the capital."

"Just have Number Four deal with it. As a disciple of the Human Sect, it's his duty to handle the Heaven Sect Saintess."

"Well... They are all members of the Heaven and Earth Society. It's not good to have them kill each other."

Luo Yuheng turned her head away in a haughty gesture.

Fine... When the time comes, I'll just push Xu Qi'an to mediate... the orange cat thought to itself.

...

At the Imperial Pharmacy.

The elderly eunuch in charge pulled a ledger from the bookshelf and handed it to Xu Qi'an, who had come to investigate the case. His voice was sharp, "The records of the Imperial Pharmacy's expenditures are cleared every five years. If you'd come a few years later, you wouldn't have found anything."

In the side hall, Biaobiao was holding a bowl of tea, her lively eyes following the ledger.

Xu Qi'an thought she wanted to see it, so he asked, "Would Your Highness like to take a look?"

"We have no interest in such things; they give us a headache just looking at them," she said crisply.

Xu Qi'an couldn't understand how Chu Caiwei, that foolish girl, had become best friends with Huaiqing. Logically, shouldn't people with similar dispositions naturally gravitate towards each other?

Chu Caiwei clearly should have been best friends with Lin'an; the two of them would have been a much better match.

"Your Highness is incredibly wise; it's just that your talents lie in other areas," Xu Qi'an said as he opened the ledger, adding, "I have a younger sister at home who is just as clever as Your Highness, though her talents don't lie in studying."

"Where do her talents lie?"

"In memorising recipes."

"...."

This ledger recorded all the pills and medicines distributed by the Imperial Pharmacy in the thirty-second year of Emperor Yuanjing's reign.

Given Huang Xiaorou's injuries, there were only a few pills that could have saved her, so finding them should have been easy. He just needed to figure out which life-saving pills the Imperial Pharmacy had, then trace the name to find them. It should have been a simple task.

However, after searching for an entire tea session, Xu Qi'an found nothing suspicious.

"In the thirty-second year of Yuanjing, the Sitianjian and Lingbao Temple provided a total of 364 types of pills, amounting to 790 bottles. Of these, only three were top-grade pills, which were awarded by His Majesty to outer ministers in the thirty-second, thirty-third, and thirty-sixth years."

Xu Qi'an closed the ledger and looked at Lin'an, saying, "I haven't find the pill that saved Huang Xiaorou."

Upon hearing this, the clever Lin'an pondered for a long time before suggesting, "Could the pill not have come from the Imperial Pharmacy?"

Xu Qi'an shook his head, "In the entire Great Feng, only Lingbao Temple and the Sitianjian can produce pills. So the pill must have come from one of these two places.

"Huang Xiaorou, a mere palace maid, would have surely died without someone powerful saving her. But in the harem, who could bypass the Imperial Pharmacy and obtain pills from the Sitianjian or Lingbao Temple?"

There was only one possible answer: Emperor Yuanjing!

It couldn't have been him. The Imperial Pharmacy belongs to Emperor Yuanjing, the entire palace is his. The Imperial Pharmacy is where he draws his pills from; he has no reason to bypass it. That would be like having my salary deposited in a bank account but then opening a separate account to secretly stash some pocket money...

Xu Qi'an suddenly thought of a possibility.

Chapter 247. Heart Sword

"Little eunuch, help this official out and go investigate this 'He'er'."

Xu Qi'an put down the ledger and turned to instruct the little eunuch who had been assigned by Emperor Yuanjing to monitor him.

The little eunuch obediently left.

After he had gone, Xu Qi'an resumed looking through the ledger, turning the pages with great care.

I really can't stand these ancient ledgers... So few words, yet so many strokes—reading it strains my eyes...

Xu Qi'an spent an entire hour meticulously reviewing the records for the entire year.

He closed the ledger and looked at the elderly eunuch in charge, saying, "Where's the latrine?"

The elderly eunuch replied, "In the backyard."

Xu Qi'an immediately went to the latrine, but instead of taking out his 8=====D, he retrieved the Earth Book fragment and found the Confucian version of a spellbook gifted to him by the great scholars.

He tore out a page of the Qi-watching Technique and burned it.

His eyes emitted a sharp, clear light, which then gradually faded.

After casting the Qi-watching technique on himself, Xu Qi'an returned to the side hall and nonchalantly asked the elderly eunuch, "I noticed something wrong with the ledger. You'll need to give me an explanation."

"Please, do tell, Sir." The elderly eunuch responded calmly.

"In the thirty-second year of Yuanjing's reign, there should have been daily deliveries of medicinal pills to the inventory, correct?"

"Well... it's been four years. I can't quite remember." The elderly eunuch felt uneasy under the copper gong's intense, deep gaze, which seemed to hide a vortex.

No lies...

Xu Qi'an continued, "While inspecting the ledger, I noticed that the records for February 10th and February 20th of that year are missing. Were there no medicinal pills delivered on those days?"

The elderly eunuch still shook his head, wearing a troubled expression, "I honestly can't recall, Sir."

Still no lies... And this old eunuch likely doesn't have an artefact that can block his qi... Old age really isn't forgiving, memory fades...

Xu Qi'an returned the ledger to the elderly eunuch and instructed him, "Give me the records of the Imperial Pharmacy's transactions within the past five days. I'll arrange for someone to assist you."

The so-called "assistance" meant supervision. Xu Qi'an had already decided who would oversee this: the little eunuch that Emperor Yuanjing had sent to monitor him.

This little eunuch was Emperor Yuanjing's spy, and every bit of progress Xu Qi'an made would be reported back to the emperor in detail.

Lin'an leaned in close to Xu Qi'an's ear and whispered, "Are you suspecting that someone tore pages from the ledger?"

"When the old eunuch retrieved the ledger, the cover was covered in dust, except for a few new fingerprints. I'm certain they were made no more than five days ago."

Impressive!

Second Princess secretly praised him, growing increasingly confident in Xu Qi'an.

At that moment, the little eunuch hurried back, his face pale and hesitant to speak.

"You may go now," Xu Qi'an dismissed the elderly eunuch who managed the Imperial Pharmacy.

The little eunuch still didn't speak, cautiously glancing at Lin'an.

"We cannot listen to this?" Lin'an became angry, her eyebrows shooting up in indignation.

As expected, though Biaobiao may not be very clever, she certainly doesn't lack the spoiled, stubborn traits of a princess. She just favors me more... Xu Qi'an frowned and said, "Speak."

The little eunuch swallowed, took a moment to gather himself, and then whispered, "He'er is from the Empress's palace."

For a brief moment, the side hall fell into dead silence.

He'er is from the Empress's palace... No wonder Huaiqing's mood changed when she heard the name... In other words, the person who saved Huang Xiaorou was the Empress... In other words, Huang Xiaorou owes a great debt to the Empress.

Yet in this case, she played the role of an agitator, leading the charge to frame the Crown Prince for consorting with a concubine and plotting against the throne... The Empress is in trouble.

"Hu-hu..."

Lost in thought, Xu Qi'an suddenly noticed Lin'an's heavy breathing beside him.

This is bad...

"I'm going to find Father."

Lin'an, gritting her teeth, left this sentence behind, then abruptly stood up and stormed out.

Xu Qi'an quickly grabbed her hand, trying to soothe her, "Your Highness, it's too early to jump to conclusions."

"Isn't it obvious? He'er is the Empress's maid, and Huang Xiaorou owes her a great debt. The Empress has always wanted to harm my Crown Prince brother so her own son can inherit the title of Crown Prince. The motive is clear as day, isn't it?" Lin'an turned her head, glaring at him:

"You're stopping me because you still have feelings for Huaiqing?"

She was referring to the "defection" situation, given that Xu Qi'an was someone she had "snatched" from Huaiqing.

Crap, what you said makes it sound like I ate Huaqing and then ate you too. If this gets back to Emperor Yuanjing, he'll order my execution...

Xu Qi'an glanced at the little eunuch and said sternly:

"This matter involves the Empress. You can't just rush out and accuse her of murdering Consort Fu and framing the Crown Prince.

"What if it turns out that the Empress is innocent?"

Lin'an loudly retorted, "I don't care, I don't care! The Crown Prince is my brother."

"Your Highness!" Xu Qi'an glared at her, his tone sharp.

"...Hmph!" Lin'an subdued her temper, dissatisfied but no longer defiant, "Then what do you propose?"

Those familiar with her personality would be shocked to see the spoiled and stubborn Second Princess so obedient in front of a mere bronze gong.

"Keep investigating, Your Highness. Simply watch and wait."

Lin'an huffed again, clearly unhappy with this outcome, but she didn't continue to throw a tantrum.

Xu Qi'an turned to the little eunuch and said, "Today's findings must be reported to His Majesty in full detail. However, be sure to keep it simple—stick to the case, nothing else."

And please omit the interactions between Lin'an and me...

Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

The little eunuch recalled his godfather's warning from the other day and was suddenly moved. Although Sir Xu's temper wasn't great, he was very kind-hearted and considerate of little people like him.

"Rest assured, Sir Xu, I will only report on the case and won't say a word more," the little eunuch declared loudly.

This little eunuch knows the drill...

Xu Qi'an nodded and added, "Afterward, go find the eunuch in charge of the Imperial Pharmacy and obtain a list of those who entered and exited within the past five days. Then, quietly cross-check it with the guards."

"Understood."

After leaving the Imperial Pharmacy, it was about 11:00 AM, and Lin'an mentioned that she would be having lunch with her mother, cruelly abandoning her yet-to-be-married fiancé.

Xu Qi'an had no choice but to join the eunuchs for a meal. The Imperial Kitchen prepared meals for the masters, while the eunuchs and palace maids ate at the Small Kitchen.

As they were halfway there, someone suddenly called out from behind: "Sir Xu..."

Xu Qi'an turned to see a blue-robed Daoist rushing over, saying with delight, "Sir Xu, I finally found you."

Knowing that any daoist who could enter the palace must be a Daoist from Lingbao Temple, Xu Qi'an clasped his hands and said, "Daozhang."

"Please, there's no need for such formality," the Daoist approached and respectfully returned the gesture, "Master Xu, the sect leader has requested your presence."

"This...." Xu Qi'an hesitated.

Luo Yuheng was someone Emperor Yuanjing had his eyes on, and Xu Qi'an was already entangled with his daughter. He didn't want to further displease Emperor Yuanjing by getting too close to another woman.

Moreover, Luo Yuheng was a second rank powerhouse. Xu Qi'an didn't want to be too close to a top-tier expert with whom he wasn't familiar, in case she discovered the existence of Shenshu... *Oh no, she might realise I've already become a monk's vessel!*

Then they'll seal me in Sangbo for five hundred years, waiting for a monk to fetch the scriptures and release me.

The undying Shenshu can survive five hundred years, but can I? I can't exactly ask heaven for five hundred more years.

"The National Teacher is waiting for you. She'd like to invite you for a meal," the Daoist said.

"Alright!" Xu Qi'an agreed.

Mainly because Luo Yuheng. She... she's just too tempting.

...

This is the second time Xu Qi'an has visited Lingbao Temple. The last time was to help Daoist Jinlian obtain a pill, during which he met Luo Yuheng.

This head of the Human Sect seems to have taken a liking to him, as she had once made a very suggestive comment. Unfortunately, Xu Qi'an, being a man of virtue, chose to ignore her advances.

Xu Qi'an was directly led into a meditation room, which contained only two meditation cushions, a small table, a small brazier, and a "Dao" character boldly written on the wall. The simple setup left no room for anything superfluous.

A Daoist child brought a large platter of temple food, with black rice, corn, and millet, along with three plates of vegetable dishes.

"Sir Xu, please enjoy your meal. The sect leader will be here shortly," the Daoist child said respectfully before retreating.

Xu Qi'an didn't start eating immediately. He glanced at the two bowls and pairs of chopsticks on the table and nodded with satisfaction. If this meal had been intended for him alone, he would have left right then and there.

Creak...

With a soft creak, the sliding door, which had just been closed, was pushed open again. The female National Teacher entered, dressed in a dark Daoist robe, carrying a horsetail fuchen on her arm. Her black hair was tied simply with a Daoist hairpin, with a few strands hanging down her forehead, giving her a slightly alluring look. The red mark on her forehead, however, added a touch of ethereal purity, creating a peculiar blend of different kinds of charm.

"National Teacher!" Xu Qi'an stood up and cupped his hands.

Luo Yuheng nodded and gestured, "Sir Xu, please eat."

"National Teacher, please enjoy the 'eel," Xu Qi'an replied politely.

The two of them sat down, served themselves a bowl of rice, and began eating in silence.

Xu Qi'an couldn't quite gauge the beautiful National Teacher's intentions, so he remained cautious and said nothing. Occasionally, he would glance at her, finding her quite pleasing to the eye.

This woman, at first glance, seemed to be a tender twenty-year-old. But the more you looked, the more she resembled a thirty-year-old woman, full of vitality. And if you looked even longer, you'd realise she was actually an exquisite beauty in her forties, with a mature and voluptuous figure and a gaze that couldn't hide her sensuality—truly a man-killer.

Xu Qi'an was reminded of the feeling he had the first time he saw her: a woman who could be a friend's mom, a kind aunt, or an English teacher with a soft heart.

He couldn't help but wonder, "Is this woman cultivating Daoism, or some kind of bewitching magic?" He frowned slightly.

These illusions weren't his fault. It had to be related to the cultivation method of the Human Sect, as confirmed by Daoist Jinlian. None of the three sects of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity were without their quirks. The Earth Sect was burdened by karma, often falling to demons. The Human Sect's situation was unclear, but it also seemed to have its side effects. As for the Heaven Sect, the path they followed was problematic from the start.

The heavens are emotionless, and thus everlasting.

But if a person is emotionless, how are they different from a corpse?

According to Xu Qi'an's understanding, the union of Heaven and Man meant becoming a rule or law.

"Daoist Jinlian mentioned that Sir Xu took a Rebirth Pill in Yunzhou?" Luo Yuheng broke the silence.

Why did Daoist Jinlian tell her that... Xu Qi'an was startled. "Yes."

"This Poor Daoist would like to borrow a bowl of your blood as a medicinal guide, to refine a pill to alleviate a stubborn ailment," Luo Yuheng said.

What kind of ailment needs my blood as a medicinal guide? Xu Qi'an glanced at her, not responding immediately as he internally searched for a way to politely decline.

Blood in this world could be used for various purposes far beyond what it was used for in his previous life. The most memorable example for him was the curse-killing technique of the Sorcerer Sect.

Luo Yuheng seemed to anticipate his reaction and calmly added while taking a bite of rice, "It was Daoist Jinlian's suggestion."

Xu Qi'an nodded. "I need to confirm this."

Luo Yuheng inclined her head in agreement.

Xu Qi'an took out the Earth Book fragment right in front of her, about to send a message, but then he remembered that he was currently "dead" and couldn't speak.

At that moment, Luo Yuheng's gaze shifted to the doorway, and she said softly, "He's here."

Xu Qi'an turned his head and saw an orange cat squatting at the threshold, its amber eyes watching them intently.

"Daoist, how have you come here... wait, aren't you unable to enter the Imperial City?"

The orange cat, with its tail erect, walked gracefully and silently across the floor, jumping onto the table.

Xu Qi'an lightly swatted it away, saying, "We're eating. Watch out for cat hair."

The orange cat had no choice but to squat on the ground, looking up at them as it spoke in a warm tone, "After recovering from my injuries, I can enter the Imperial City freely now. But I still can't enter the palace."

So Daoist Jinlian's power is even greater than I thought... Xu Qi'an mused. He wasn't a novice anymore and knew that to sneak into the Imperial City without being detected, one would need at least the strength of the fourth rank.

Of course, this didn't apply to martial artists.

Due to the characteristics of the martial artist's system, even a first-rank martial artist couldn't silently infiltrate the Imperial City without being noticed; they'd likely be detected.

However, if it were a first-rank martial artist, they could probably solo the entire "Great Feng Capital" dungeon.

"What about the blood..." Although Xu Qi'an trusted Daoist Jinlian, he was still a bit hesitant.

This is like someone asking to use your computer. Even if it's a good friend or relative, you'd still feel reluctant. After all, who doesn't have a few hundred gigs of "wives" stored on their hard drive?

"We need to borrow the medicinal properties of the Rebirth Pill in your blood," Daoist Jinlian explained after glancing at Luo Yuheng and seeing no reaction from her. He continued, "The path of the Human Sect is fraught with difficulties, as you may have already understood to some extent. Daoist Luo suffers monthly from the burning of karmic fire, enduring the agony of the seven emotions and six desires. The Rebirth Pill can shed the old and bring forth the new, temporarily easing her symptoms."

Xu Qi'an nodded slowly and boldly commented, "No wonder I find the National Teacher to have an extraordinary charm."

If Daoist Jinlian weren't present, he would never have dared to make such a remark.

Daoist Jinlian responded with a smile, "The Dao of the Human Sect, when cultivated to a high level, reveals the appearance of all beings, allowing you to see the aspect you most desire in your heart... I'm referring to matters of love and affection."

As he spoke, the orange cat's face displayed a human-like smile. "What did you see?"

Luo Yuheng looked up at Xu Qi'an with an expressionless face.

Xu Qi'an's face suddenly froze.

This reaction... Daoist Jinlian was taken aback, then became interested and pressed, "It seems you were deeply affected."

I thought I was into black stockings, mature women, elder sisters, and lolis. But in the end, I realised I was just a simple lecher... I've never felt so deeply about this realisation before... Xu Qi'an forced a laugh and casually changed the subject, "Since Daoist Jinlian is acting as the intermediary, I'm naturally willing to do my part."

Luo Yuheng nodded in satisfaction and softly said, "If there's any pill you need, feel free to ask. Consider it compensation for your blood."

Daoist Jinlian spoke up before Xu Qi'an could, "No rush. Take your time to think. The favour of the head of the Human Sect is not something easily granted."

Luo Yuheng glanced at the orange cat with a hint of disdain.

...

Jingxiu Palace.

Lin'an, accompanied by her guards, arrived at her mother's residence. She rushed into the room, her red dress fluttering as she called out, "Mother, Mother..."

Inside the room, Consort Chen was secretly wiping away her tears. When she saw her daughter running in, she quickly turned her face away to hide the tear stains.

The usually lively Lin'an suddenly became quiet. She walked slowly to Consort Chen's side and held her hand, a flash of concern crossing her enchanting peach blossom eyes.

"Mother, Brother Crown Prince will be fine. The innocent will clear themselves. Please don't cry."

Lately, her mood had been terrible—partly because of Xu Qi'an's death, and partly because of the Crown Prince's predicament, which had caused Consort Chen to cry daily. As a daughter, it pained her to see her mother so despondent, but she felt powerless to help.

A maidservant standing beside them whispered, "In the past few days, some kings from the royal family came to see Madam. They said that the ministers outside are discussing the matter of establishing a new Crown Prince."

Hearing this, Lin'an's anger flared up. "Those short-sighted dogs, why would they tell Mother about this?"

She was so furious that she cursed her uncles as "dogs."

"Lin'an, don't speak nonsense." Consort Chen grasped her daughter's hand tightly, her expression sorrowful. "Your brother, the Crown Prince, was born of a concubine. Over the years, people have always said he ascended improperly. Maybe it's better if he is deposed. At least then, we wouldn't have to live in constant fear."

This statement ignited a fire in Lin'an's heart. She knew her mother was referring to that scheming mistress of the harem.

The head maid sighed, "If only the case could be thoroughly investigated and the truth revealed. But so many days have passed, and there's been no progress."

The investigation had to be kept confidential, something Xu Qi'an had repeatedly emphasised to the two princesses. But now, seeing her mother growing more emaciated and her eyes red and swollen, Lin'an couldn't hold back any longer. She blurted out, "Who said there's been no progress? Xu Qi'an has already uncovered most of the truth."

Consort Chen's eyes brightened, and she stared intently at her daughter. "Is it true? Has that Xu Qi'an really almost solved the case?"

In her excitement, she gripped Lin'an's hand tightly.

"Mother, you're hurting me."

Since she had already spoken, Lin'an didn't bother hiding anything anymore. "Mother, it was the Empress who framed Big Brother the Crown Prince. It must be her."

Consort Chen's face turned pale. "Lin'an, don't speak such nonsense."

"Mother, don't worry. Lin'an has solid evidence..." She then recounted the entire course of events to Consort Chen.

"So it was really her... If not for her unfaithfulness back then, how could His Majesty have demoted her to the Cold Palace, and how could my son have become Crown Prince?" Consort Chen broke down in tears. "His Majesty is so kind-hearted, remembering their old relationship and not deposing her completely. Yet she dares to scheme for the Crown Prince's position again after all these years."

Consort Chen's words struck Lin'an like a bolt of lightning.

What had she just heard?

The Empress was unfaithful? Her father intended to depose her?

When had this all happened? How did she not know?

Images of the Empress, with her gentle nature but perpetual lack of smiles, floated through Lin'an's mind. Although she resented the Empress for framing her big brother, deep down, Lin'an didn't believe she was an unfaithful woman.

But after hearing this shocking news, many past details she hadn't paid attention to suddenly made sense. For example, the Empress had always kept a low profile, rarely involving herself in palace affairs. Lin'an also realised that since she could remember, she had never seen the Empress smile. Additionally, the Empress had always been cold and indifferent toward Huaqing and the Fourth Prince, showing none of the love that Consort Chen showed to her and the Crown Prince.

"Mother, what...what exactly happened? The Empress was unfaithful... Who was the man?" Lin'an gripped Consort Chen's hand tightly, burning with rage.

As the daughter most loved by the Emperor, it was natural for her to be furious upon hearing this news.

"Don't... Don't ask anymore..." Consort Chen realised she had misspoken and shook her head tearfully. "This is His Majesty's taboo. You must not speak of it to anyone."

.....

"I don't like owing favors. Sir Xu, just tell me directly what you want." Luo Yuheng was not inclined to go along with Daoist Jinlian's plan.

Auntie, I don't want to struggle anymore... Xu Qi'an screamed internally.

As for the reward, he couldn't think of anything specific for the moment, so he couldn't help but glance at the orange cat, seeking its advice.

The orange cat pondered for a long time before saying, "The Human Sect is renowned for its swordsmanship across the Nine Provinces. Perhaps a sword technique would make a good gift."

"But I use a sabre," Xu Qi'an reminded it.

"Who says sword techniques can't be applied to a saber?" Daoist Jinlian responded with a chuckle.

That's true. As long as the essence of the technique is extracted, it can be applied to the sabre just the same. It's like how I can combine One Blade from Heaven and Earth with the Lion's Roar to defeat enemies.

Xu Qi'an slowly nodded.

Luo Yuheng raised her hand and lightly swept it across the table. Three thin booklets appeared on the table.

The National Master's pleasant voice said, "I have three sword techniques here: _Heart Sword_, _Qi Sword_, and _Sword Control_.

Heart Sword requires the assistance of the Primordial Spirit for cultivation. The spirit is used as a whetstone for the sword, which must be sharpened daily without rest. It cannot cut the flesh, but it is deadly against the Primordial Spirit."

Hearing this, Xu Qi'an instinctively looked at the orange cat.

The orange cat hissed and extended its sharp claws, warning, "Sir Xu, don't provoke me."

Xu Qi'an quickly looked away.

Luo Yuheng continued, "_Qi Sword_ is the opposite of _Heart Sword_. It is a top-tier offensive technique. When mastered, the sword energy is endless and invincible."

Xu Qi'an couldn't help but ask, "A sword's breath travels three thousand miles, a lone sword's light chills the nine provinces?"

Luo Yuheng couldn't help but glance at him, her beautiful eyes, as clear as a limpid autumn water, lingering on Xu Qi'an for a while. She praised, "It is said that Sir Xu's poetic talent is unparalleled, and it's true. This line is full of grandeur and boundless imagery."

That wasn't my line. It was written by a famous writer who's famous for filling manuscripts with water...

"As for _Sword Control_..." Luo Yuheng waved her hand lightly. The doors and windows instantly flew open, and a sword light shot out from her sleeve, whistling as it danced above the courtyard.

It moved as swiftly as thunder and as gracefully as a fish.

Xu Qi'an marveled, "Sword Control is truly an immortal technique. In that case, I choose _Heart Sword_."

Luo Yuheng was taken aback for a moment but then nodded. "Alright."

Though Sword Control was flashy and powerful, Xu Qi'an felt that Heart Sword was more suitable for him.

The reason was simple: his One Blade from Heaven and Earth technique was an extremely extreme saber technique—nothing in the world could withstand it. If something could, then it was time to run for his life.

So, when he cultivated, his priority was not to add more techniques but to perfect One Blade from Heaven and Earth.

Or maybe after mastering the Lion's Roar, this belief had become even more firm.

He had control techniques and physical damage covered, but what he lacked now was an attack in the Primordial Spirit domain.

Luo Yuheng retracted the Qi Sword and Sword Control manuals and pushed the Heart Sword manual toward him. "If you encounter any difficulties in your cultivation, you may come to Lingbao Temple to seek my guidance. I can offer you assistance three times."

"Thank you, National Teacher," Xu Qi'an thanked her sincerely.

Then, Luo Yuheng took out a jade bowl from her sleeve and pushed it to Xu Qi'an, holding it between her slender fingers.

The bowl wasn't large, only about three times the size of a teacup. Xu Qi'an felt relieved; he had been worried it would be a large bowl like the one Xu Lingyin used to eat.

After obtaining the blood, Luo Yuheng hurried off to refine her elixir.

The quiet room was now left with just the orange cat and Xu Qi'an.

"Daoist, please help me block the others for a moment. I need to privately contact Li Miaozhen."

Taking advantage of the opportunity, Xu Qi'an planned to inform Number Two about his resurrection.

To this request, Daoist Jinlian simply responded, "Hehe."

"What's the problem?" Xu Qi'an frowned.

"Li Miaozhen mentioned that she would come to the capital after the start of spring. Given the situation in Yunzhou, it would likely be after the bandit exterminations have finished. In any case, she'll be here soon, why do you need to hurry?" Daoist Jinlian responded.

He was anticipating the moment when Li Miaozhen, after realising that Xu Qi'an had resurrected, would be so angry that she would go fight him instead, thus disrupting the battle between heaven and man and sorting out the conflict between the two sides.

"Indeed!" Xu Qi'an nodded.

Chapter 248. Assassination Attempt

Leaving Lingbao Temple, it was already the quarter to two.

Xu Qi'an entered the imperial palace, requesting a message to be delivered. He waited at the palace gate for a quarter of an hour, and by two, the little eunuch finally arrived.

"Sir Xu, how should we proceed with the investigation?" the little eunuch asked.

"We'll head to Feng Palace^[^1] to see the Empress... There's no need to inform His Majesty in advance if I'm going to see the Empress, right?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The little eunuch quickly shook his head. "His Majesty has said that within the harem, you may go wherever you wish. Of course, the condition is that a servant accompanies you, especially when meeting with the Noble Consort or the Empress."

Xu Qi'an nodded.

It wouldn't be appropriate to meet the Emperor's women in private, after all.

The full name of Feng Palace was Fengqi Palace, the largest and most luxurious hall in the harem—excluding the Emperor's sleeping quarters.

When they arrived at Fengqi Palace, they were informed that the Empress was taking a nap. Xu Qi'an and the little eunuch waited in the outer corridor for nearly half an hour before a graceful palace maid came to inform them:

"The Empress is awake; Sir Xu, please come in."

Xu Qi'an followed her into the hall, where he saw the Empress, the mother of the nation, in the luxuriously decorated main hall. She was dressed in a dark robe embroidered with golden phoenixes, wearing an exquisite phoenix crown.

Her eyebrows were as delicate as a painting, her lips full and soft. Though she was no longer young, her face was full of collagen, showing no signs of aging. This added a mature charm to her flawless beauty.

Among the beauties I've seen, she ranks second. Luo Yuheng ranks first, but the National Teacher has an inherent allure, a buff of sorts, while the Empress relies on her natural assets... With such a woman as the Empress, no one else in the harem could stand a chance.

Xu Qi'an quickly bowed his head, maintaining the proper etiquette and decorum expected of an external official.

"Indeed, a young talent," the Empress, evidently a connoisseur of appearances, scrutinized Xu Qi'an and nodded approvingly. "Huaiqing often mentions you to us, and speaks highly of you. We have also heard of your achievements in solving cases in the capital."

The first impression on both sides was good.

Whether it was due to his self-confidence, Xu Qi'an felt that the Empress held him in high regard and didn't treat him as an outsider at all.

"Wei Yuan is fortunate to have such an outstanding subordinate as you," the Empress said softly. "Serve tea for Sir Xu."

A palace maid presented him with steaming tea. Xu Qi'an accepted it with both hands but did not drink it, instead getting straight to the point: "This lowly official is here regarding the Consort Fu case and has a few questions for Your Majesty."

"Please ask, Sir Xu."

"Does Your Majesty know a palace maid named Huang Xiaorou?"

"We do not know her," the Empress shook her head.

"Then, in Your Majesty's palace, is there a palace maid named He'er?"

"There is." The Empress remained silent for a few seconds before slowly nodding.

"Nanny Rong from Xie Pavilion said that four years ago, Huang Xiaorou once attempted suicide for no apparent reason. The palace maid who shared a room with her saved her, and that maid was He'er from Your Majesty's palace."

"He'er has never been to Xie Pavilion," the Empress flatly denied.

Xu Qi'an continued, "After examining the body, this humble official found that Huang Xiaorou sustained fatal injuries, beyond the abilities of an ordinary maid to save, and not even the imperial physicians could have cured her. It must have been a miraculous elixir that brought her back to life."

The Empress stared at Xu Qi'an and said coldly, "Does Sir Xu have any evidence for these claims?"

"The body itself is evidence."

"And what about the elixir?"

"...There is none," Xu Qi'an shook his head.

Was the Empress the one who destroyed the records in the Imperial Pharmacy?

The Empress nodded and softly said, "We are tired now, escort Sir Xu out of the hall."

But you just finished your nap... Xu Qi'an's lips twitched as he reluctantly rose and left Fengqi Palace with the palace maid.

...

Xu Qi'an glanced at the sky. "Little Eunuch, have you finished collecting the list I asked for?"

The little eunuch pulled a folded sheet of xuan paper from his sleeve. "I was just about to hand it over to you, Sir Xu."

Not bad, efficient as always, the palace trained you well.

Xu Qi'an unfolded the list and quickly scanned it. It contained the names of a dozen or so palace maids, servants, and guards.

"We'll investigate them one by one, following the list," Xu Qi'an said.

"And what about the Empress..."

"We won't be able to investigate her."

Xu Qi'an sighed. Though Emperor Yuanjing had given him great authority, allowing him to investigate anyone he wished, if the Empress refused to cooperate, there was no way for Xu Qi'an to force her hand.

But one thing is clear: the Empress has something to hide.

Could it really be the Empress who did this? If so, wouldn't Huaqing be pitiful? Should I continue investigating? But if I don't, wouldn't Biaobiao be pitiful? Here it comes, the classic two-choice dilemma... Xu Qi'an sighed silently.

But speaking of which, the Empress is incredibly beautiful. Even at her age, she still has such grace—how stunning must she have been when she was younger? No wonder she became the Empress.

Huaqing does resemble the Empress in certain features.

Comparing the two, I still think Luo Yuheng is superior because she satisfies my varied tastes... Oh, Su Su is also nice.

Xu Qi'an couldn't help but recall what Daoist Jinlian had just said: Luo Yuheng possesses the image of all beings, allowing men to see the type of woman they prefer. For Xu Qi'an, that was a young lady in her twenties, a woman in her thirties, and a mature lady in her forties...

I really don't want to admit that I'm a lecher.

In the next two hours, Xu Qi'an arranged for the investigation of the people on the list. Due to time constraints, he had to leave the palace before the gates closed, so he only managed to investigate a third of them.

Amid the loud closing of the palace gates, he left the imperial palace, retrieved the black-gold long sabre gifted by the Jianzheng from the Imperial Guard, and leisurely rode out of the imperial city.

By this time, only the last rays of the setting sun remained.

The curfew had begun, and the streets were already deserted. Dressed in his Nightwatcher uniform and with the golden token in hand, he could pass through anywhere except the inner palace.

"Clip-clop, clip-clop..."

His mare trotted down the empty streets as Xu Qi'an contemplated the threads of the Consort Fu case.

Consort Fu was the biggest victim in this entire case, a pawn sacrificed to frame the Crown Prince. The one who acted was the already silenced Huang Xiaorou.

Huang Xiaorou had once been gravely injured but was saved by the Empress, so she owed the Empress a great debt.

The Empress's fourth son is a legitimate heir, while the current Crown Prince is of concubine birth. The Empress was unwilling to see the Crown Prince's position taken by another, so she devised a scheme to frame him and reclaim the position of the heir apparent.

The motive is clear, and the entire case makes sense, except for the lack of evidence.

Yes, to convict the Empress, more evidence is needed.

Nanny Rong was right; the secrets in this deep palace are too many. Once you step in, you can't pull yourself out. I thought this case would take some time, but I didn't expect it to progress so quickly. Now I don't even have the chance to drag it out. Damn it, Yuanjing Emperor still hasn't issued the decree to grant me a title. I'll request leave tomorrow.

At that moment, a picture formed in Xu Qi'an's mind: to his left, a black-clad figure crouched behind the roof ridge, and to his right, another black-clad figure was similarly hidden.

Ahead, a black-clad man with a sword stood in the alleyway.

Thanks to the unique abilities of a Refining Spirit martial artist, Xu Qi'an immediately sensed the danger.

I'm being ambushed... The thought flashed in his mind just as the sharp sound of something slicing through the air reached his ears.

...

Dusk.

Emperor Yuanjing had just finished his evening meal and was planning to visit Lingbao Temple to meet with Luo Yuheng, to meditate and listen to her Daoist teachings.

A eunuch stationed outside suddenly reported, "Your Majesty, Noble Consort Chen is requesting an audience."

What could she want at this hour... Emperor Yuanjing frowned, pondered for a moment, and then said, "Let her in."

If Consort Chen had come to his quarters at this time a few years ago, Emperor Yuanjing might have thought she was offering herself to him, seeking to spend the night. In the first ten years of his cultivation, the consorts in the harem persistently sought his favor, requesting to serve him in bed. Emperor Yuanjing ignored them all, and those with stubborn tempers would kneel outside his quarters all night.

Eventually, when they realized that his heart was resolute and they could not regain his favour, the consorts gave up and settled into their lives peacefully.

Now, they were quite buddhist about the matter.

Each lived their own life, and sometimes they would even gather to chat and socialize.

The imperial harem under Emperor Yuanjing's reign was probably the most harmonious in five hundred years of the great Feng Dynasty.

After the eunuch left, Emperor Yuanjing sat cross-legged on the bed, closed his eyes, and began his breathing exercises. Not long after, Noble Consort Chen rushed in, crying as she spoke:

"Your Majesty, you must seek justice for me, and for the Crown Prince."

So she's here for the Crown Prince. This outcome did not surprise Emperor Yuanjing—in fact, he had anticipated it.

With his rejuvenated black hair, Emperor Yuanjing opened his eyes and looked calmly at Consort Chen. "The matter regarding the Crown Prince is still under investigation. Beloved Consort, please return. The truth will naturally come to light."

"Still under investigation? But hasn't the case been solved already, Your Majesty? I heard it from Lin'an." Consort Chen dabbed at her tears with a silk handkerchief, speaking in a sorrowful tone:

"The Crown Prince has been wronged. He's been wronged!"

Hmm? Emperor Yuanjing frowned and asked, "What did Lin'an tell you?"

"That that Sir Xu has already uncovered the truth..."

Emperor Yuanjing was taken aback. He knew that earlier today, a drowned body was pulled from the Xie Pavilion's well—the missing palace maid from Consort Fu's entourage. But he never expected Xu Qi'an to uncover the truth so quickly.

Between sobs, Consort Chen relayed the information she had learned.

After listening, Emperor Yuanjing's expression grew dark. He turned to the chief eunuch and ordered, "Bring the one monitoring Xu Qi'an to us."

The old eunuch in the serpent robe responded and left, returning in less than a quarter-hour with the little eunuch.

The little eunuch glanced around. Emperor Yuanjing sat cross-legged on the bed, his expression unreadable, while Consort Chen knelt by the bedside, sobbing softly.

Emperor Yuanjing asked calmly, "What progress was made in today's investigation?"

The little eunuch, having already prepared his report, responded without hesitation: "After entering the palace, Sir Xu immediately went to examine the body. He concluded that the palace maid, Huang Xiaorou, was first drowned by someone pressing her into water before being thrown into the well."

He then detailed the process of the autopsy to substantiate this conclusion.

"Moreover, Sir Xu also found that the palace maid, Huang Xiaorou, had previously sustained a fatal injury to her chest several years ago, which should have killed her. However, she was saved by a miraculous pill... He then went to the Xie Pavilion to question Nanny Rong..."

This time, the little eunuch wisely stuck to the facts, avoiding any personal commentary or mentioning the interactions between Xu Qi'an and the two princesses.

He had realized that while reporting these incidents could cause trouble for Xu Qi'an, his own use of the princesses to snitch would likely displease the Emperor even more.

You harm others and harm yourself, why bother?

Besides, Xu Qi'an had always treated him well, caring about him. Even though he had a bit of a temper, he was otherwise good-natured.

"The records from the Imperial Pharmacy were confirmed to be tampered with?" Emperor Yuanjing asked for confirmation.

"That is what Sir Xu said," the little eunuch replied, still withholding any personal judgment.

Emperor Yuanjing slowly nodded. "Notify the coroner to enter the palace immediately and re-examine Huang Xiaorou's body. We must have an answer tonight."

Half an hour later, the chief eunuch returned with the coroner's autopsy results, which corroborated Xu Qi'an's findings without a doubt.

Emperor Yuanjing was momentarily lost in thought, not speaking for a long time. The vast palace was enveloped in silence.

Finally, Consort Chen, still prostrate on the floor, cried out, "Sir Xu dares not investigate the Empress. Only Your Majesty can intervene in this matter. Your consort begs Your Majesty to seek justice for the Crown Prince and for me."

Chapter 249. Court Assembly

The arrow transformed into a fleeting shadow in the darkness, too swift for Xu Qi'an's eyes to follow. However, his powerful spiritual sense locked onto the faintly cyan arrow.

Refining Spirit was considered a minor peak in a martial artist's strength—a statement that's not made lightly. Martial artists at this stage possessed a hypersensitive intuition when it came to danger.

Upon reaching the Refining Spirit stage, one typically bade farewell to the fate of being ambushed, taken by surprise, or attacked unawares.

A military crossbow from the Sitianjian — a lethal weapon that could even kill Refining Spirits!

Xu Qi'an immediately identified the origin of the weapon, as he had once possessed such an artefact.

Instinctively, he thought to leap off his horse to dodge the arrow.

"No, my little mare can't die here..."

This thought flashed through his mind, and he changed his plan. Reaching to his lower back, he unsheathed his blade with a clear, sharp sound and, with a reverse slash, precisely cut the arrow in half.

In the faint sound of sliding tiles, two men in black leaped from the rooftop, attacking Xu Qi'an from both sides.

They wielded standard-issue long sabres, their overwhelming force distorting the air as they aimed to cut down both Xu Qi'an and his horse.

"Hyah!"

Sensing the danger, Xu Qi'an squeezed his legs against his horse's belly, urging his beloved mare into a mad dash forward, narrowly avoiding the pincer attack.

At the same time, he vaulted off the horse, landing lightly on the roof of a tavern.

"Boom!"

The two black-clad men's sabre auras struck empty ground, carving deep grooves into the earth.

Refining Spirit... Xu Qi'an glanced down, making a mental assessment.

What concerned him even more was the man in black hiding in the alley ahead—someone likely even stronger than a Refining Spirit martial artist.

A Strategic retreat!

This was the Inner City, patrolled by the Nightwatchers and the Five Guards of the Imperial City in shifts. These three assassins couldn't linger long; the time they had was even less than what the Chinese national football team had left on the clock.

As long as he didn't engage them in prolonged combat, they wouldn't be able to take him down quickly, and they would retreat on their own. Then, he could immediately use the Qi-watching technique, join forces with the Nightwatchers, and turn the tables on them.

At that moment, another image flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind: the tall man in black had mysteriously appeared behind him, throwing a punch at the back of his head.

Damn, when did he get behind me...? Xu Qi'an's body reacted faster than his mind, instinctively diving off the rooftop.

Simultaneously, the sound of a fist breaking through the air echoed like a thunderclap behind him.
Boom!

The punch, wrapped in powerful qi, exploded into rippling shockwaves in mid-air.

Having missed the strike, the expert seemed surprised, not expecting this newly advanced Refining Spirit martial artist to be so keenly perceptive.

As Xu Qi'an landed, he was immediately met with attacks from the two Refining Spirit fighters.

Clang, clang... He parried their slashing sabres, and as soon as he touched down, he quickly fled.

Moving across rooftops was too dangerous; skillfully using narrow alleys, buildings, and other obstacles was a more prudent approach.

But before he had run far, the sound of something breaking through the air rapidly closed in from behind. His mind instinctively presented an image of the black-clad man attacking.

Xu Qi'an gritted his teeth, twisted his waist, and turned to slash back.

Clang!

His black-gold long saber clashed against a fist, sparks erupting from the contact. The force caused the skin of Xu Qi'an's right hand to crack, and his legs skidded along the ground, sliding back over a dozen metres. The thick soles of his shoes were torn from his body with a sharp screeching sound.

A Sixth-rank martial artist — Bronze Skin and Iron Bones.

Though he had anticipated it, Xu Qi'an's heart still sank.

The mastermind behind this attack knew his capabilities, sending assassins that could almost guarantee his defeat... They also knew his usual route, ambushing him on the inevitable path.

Who wants to kill me?

Now wasn't the time to ponder this, as the two Refining Spirit experts were already closing in. The trio was clearly a well-coordinated team, with the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert leading the charge, supported by the two Refining Spirit martial artists. Their attacks were seamless and relentless.

Within fifty moves, I'll be dead... This terrifying realization flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind.

In his desperation, he abruptly halted, ignoring the attack from the left, and feigned a reckless strike of mutual destruction with the one on the right. Strangely, the man on the right met his strike head-on without hesitation, while the one on the left, who could have attacked, withdrew his sabre defensively.

Xu Qi'an swiftly turned and slashed at the black-clad man on the left, striking precisely on the edge of the man's saber.

Thunk... The man on the right stabbed Xu Qi'an in the left shoulder with his long blade.

"Damn it!"

Xu Qi'an cursed under his breath.

His true target had been the man on the left, with the reckless strike against the man on the right being a mere feint. Unfortunately, the opponent, also at the Refining Spirit stage, had sensed the danger in advance.

Trying to steal a chicken, only to lose the bait.

Xu Qi'an kicked the man on the right away.

At that moment, the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert had already charged forward in an instant, gathering qi in his fist and smashing it into Xu Qi'an's chest with ferocious force.

Bang!

Xu Qi'an felt something shatter in his chest. The next moment, he was sent flying as if hit by a heavy truck.

Cough, cough, cough...

Steadying himself, Xu Qi'an coughed up blood. The shattering sound in his chest came from the Nightwatcher-issued bronze gong and Song Qing's protective heart mirror.

With the dual-layered defence, he barely survived the full-force strike of the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert.

"Standard weapons, the Sitianjian's military crossbow, and daring to kill in broad daylight in the Inner City—you must be suicide warriors of some high-up figure."

As he spoke, Xu Qi'an discreetly scanned the surroundings.

The three black-clad men ignored Xu Qi'an's words, showing no awareness of being typical villains, and continued their relentless pursuit.

Xu Qi'an turned and ran, darting into a narrow alley on the right.

The three black-clad men chased him into the alley, only to find Xu Qi'an standing at the far end, his razor-sharp long saber already sheathed.

"Why aren't you running?" the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones assassin asked, his voice hoarse, clearly disguised.

"No point in running, so I've decided to kill you here," Xu Qi'an said, squinting his eyes in satisfaction at the alley's narrow width, which could only accommodate one person at a time.

One strike—he had only one chance.

The Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert frowned, concentrating to sense his surroundings, but detected no sign of the Nightwatchers or patrolling soldiers.

Yet Xu Qi'an's confidence made him instinctively wary.

Is he bluffing?

At this moment, he saw the newly advanced Refining Spirit martial artist, the Bronze Gong, slowly place his right hand on the hilt of his sabre.

Focusing on a single point, reaching his peak.

All emotions receded, all qi dampened, like the sea retreating before a tsunami.

At that moment, the three black-clad men felt a premonition of danger. Their Refining Spirit instincts screamed: Danger, danger, danger...

Without hesitation, they followed their warrior instincts and began to retreat from the alley. But just then, a roar pierced their eardrums and shook their spirits, causing their consciousness to lapse into a brief chaos, losing control over their bodies.

Immediately after, they heard the sharp sound of a blade being drawn from its sheath, like a dragon's cry.

The Bronze Skin and Iron Bones assassin was the first to break free from the Lion's Roar's effects, only to see a thin line of blade light slashing towards him. He barely had time to cross his arms, summoning his qi and muscles to rely on his indestructible body to take the blow head-on.

...

“Patapata...”

A Bronze Gong at the Refining Qi level was sprinting across the rooftops, following the trail of destruction until he reached the alley. He leaned over to look into the alley and saw four figures in a standoff. The three black-clad men stood motionless, while across from them, Xu Qi'an was leaning on his blade, gasping for breath, drenched in sweat, with wisps of steam rising from the back of his head.

“Over here!”

The Bronze Gong shouted, holding a sword in one hand and a military crossbow in the other as he jumped into the alley, standing beside Xu Qi'an. Two more Bronze Gongs arrived on the adjacent rooftops and entered the alley.

“Sir Xu, are you alright?”

The patrolling trio expressed their concern. They attuned their senses and, not hearing any heartbeat from the black-clad men, concluded that the assassins were already dead.

“Just a little hurt, nothing serious.”

Xu Qi'an panted. Before his comrades arrived, he had already taken a Strength Pill, and his strength was gradually recovering. However, it would take at least another quarter of an hour before he could walk properly again.

The blade gifted by the Jianzheng was a perfect match for the *One Blade from Heaven and Earth* technique.

The three Bronze Gongs nodded slowly, looking at the black-clad men. The fact that they had forced Xu Qi'an, who had just entered the Refining Spirit realm, into such a dire situation suggested that at least one of them was at the Refining Spirit level.

At that moment, the sound of heavy footsteps approached as a fifty-man squad of the Imperial Guards arrived.

"Sir Xu, please return to the constabulary for treatment. We'll handle these three."

One of the Bronze Gongs stepped out of the alley and instructed the Imperial Guards who had just arrived, "Escort Sir Xu back to the Nightwatcher constabulary. Leave ten men here to assist me with the bodies."

The squad leader cupped his fist and responded, "Understood."

After Xu Qi'an left, the three Bronze Gongs returned to the alley. When they touched the bodies, the motionless black-clad men suddenly split in half, their upper and lower bodies separating with a diagonal cut at the waist, leaving a mess of organs and blood on the ground.

The Bronze Gongs frowned, feeling both disgust and surprise.

"I recall that Xu Ningyan's signature move is a powerful blade technique. He once injured Silver Gong Zhu with a single strike."

"Yeah. Judging by the scene, his technique has grown even more formidable. He killed three men with one slash, and among them was surely someone at the Refining Spirit level."

The three simultaneously looked at the foremost black-clad man. It was clear that he was the strongest of the three.

"Wait, where's his weapon?"

The other two black-clad men were equipped with standard long sabres and military crossbows, but this man's hands were empty, with no weapon in sight.

Did Xu Ningyan take it?

With doubts in their minds, they inspected the body separately. When they touched the remains, they felt a metallic texture under their fingers.

The corpse had retained its tension from when the man had gathered his strength just before death.

"Huh?"

Simultaneously, a series of question marks popped into their minds. It took them a few seconds to process, and when they did, they were overwhelmed by a mix of disbelief and shock.

“Bronze... Bronze Skin and Iron Bones....” One of the Bronze Gongs murmured.

...

An hour later, at the Nightwatcher constabulary.

The Divine Sword Hall.

Zhang Kaitai, who was on duty tonight, had gathered all the Silver Gongs to discuss the assassination attempt on Xu Qi'an.

The Silver Gong who had just returned from inspecting the scene reported, “From the time of the attack to the moment the enemies were killed, the entire incident lasted no more than eight minutes. It seems the assassins knew Xu Ningyan's route in advance and ambushed him on a path he had to take.

“After a brief skirmish, they chased Xu Ningyan into an alley, where they were all killed by a single slash. The execution was swift and clean.”

Zhang Kaitai nodded and looked at another Silver Gong, who was in charge of examining the bodies.

The Silver Gong spoke in a deep voice, “The assassins used the most common standard long swords. These are used by the Three Great Imperial Armies and the Five Royal Guard Divisions. Even some household guards of the nobles and ministers use such swords. We can't trace anything specific from the weapons.

“Additionally, we found a magical artefact — a military crossbow on one of the assassins, powerful enough to threaten someone at the Refining Spirit level. But this too doesn't offer any leads.

“Corruption is rampant in both the Ministry of Industry and the Ministry of War, and it's common for nobles and officials to privately trade military supplies. Over the years, the amount of leaked artefacts and weapons is countless. It's impossible to trace.

“If we attempt to investigate, it could implicate half the officials in the capital. Even if His Majesty personally orders it, we might end up with nothing.”

Zhang Kaitai nodded, as if he had expected this, and asked, “What about the cultivation levels of the three assassins?”

“Two were at the Refining Spirit level, and one was at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones level.”

To kill both Refining Spirit and Bronze Skin and Iron Bones experts with a single slash... The hall fell into a deathly silence.

After what felt like an eternity, Zhang Kaitai spoke, “Where is Xu Ningyan?”

“He passed out after we treated his wounds.”

Zhang Kaitai nodded, then glanced around at the Silver Gongs, coughing to clear his throat, “You don’t need to focus too much on certain details. As Silver Gongs, you are all top talents of Great Feng, second to none. Occasionally... occasionally, there are one or two freaks among us, but you shouldn’t measure yourselves against them.”

The Silver Gongs forced out a few words of agreement, their smiles strained.

Zhang Kaitai shifted the topic, “Who do you think sent the assassins?”

A Silver Gong frowned and replied, “We don’t yet know who Xu Ningyan has recently made enemies with. Based on the information we have, if we rule out personal grudges, it’s highly likely related to the Consort Fu case.”

...

The next day, at six.

Zhang Kaitai first went to visit Xu Qi’an. Seeing that he was still asleep, Zhang Kaitai didn’t disturb him and instead retrieved the dossier on the “Xu Qi’an Assassination Attempt” that had been prepared by the clerks last night. He then headed to the Tower of Noble Spirit.

After being announced, he entered the tower and met Wei Yuan in the tea room on the seventh floor.

This high-ranking eunuch’s movements were limited to two places: the Imperial Palace and the Tower of Noble Spirit.

Thanks to the Nightwatchers’ intelligence network, Wei Yuan could learn about events across the empire without ever leaving his quarters.

“Duke Wei, Xu Ningyan was ambushed after leaving the Imperial Palace yesterday,” Zhang Kaitai said, handing over the dossier.

Wei Yuan took the dossier but didn’t open it immediately. Instead, he asked, “How is he?”

“He sustained some injuries, but nothing serious. His energy is severely depleted, so he’s still asleep,” Zhang Kaitai replied.

Wei Yuan nodded before finally opening the dossier. After quickly reading through it, he looked up at Zhang Kaitai, “Two at the Refining Spirit level, and one at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones level?”

He seemed to be seeking confirmation.

Even someone as wise as Duke Wei was often left surprised by that kid... Zhang Kaitai gave a nod, “Bronze Skin and Iron Bones.”

Wei Yuan was silent for a long time before he suddenly chuckled, “Not bad, not bad at all.”

Seizing the opportunity, Zhang Kaitai asked, “Could this be related to the Consort Fu case?”

“The Consort Fu case is His Majesty’s private matter. It’s not appropriate for an outside official to interfere, but I will report this matter,” Wei Yuan replied as he closed the dossier and frowned slightly.

He had few spies in the palace; after all, the Imperial Palace was Emperor Yuanjing's domain. Planting too many spies there would only provoke the emperor's wrath. Ever since three of his informants were removed, Wei Yuan had temporarily ceased his surveillance of the palace.

There should always be a degree of tacit understanding between ruler and subject. Emperor Yuanjing had clearly signaled to him: "Stop prying into the palace affairs."

However, after Xu Qi'an's assassination attempt, Wei Yuan felt a surge of anger. He decided to reactivate his palace informants and personally oversee this case.

Footsteps echoed from the stairway outside, drawing Wei Yuan's attention, and Zhang Kaitai turned to look as well.

A black-clad clerk entered the tea room with his head lowered and respectfully reported, "Duke Wei, there's an order from the palace — court assembly, eight o'clock."

"I understand," Wei Yuan nodded.

"Seems like something major..." Zhang Kaitai tactfully stood up, "Then your servant will take his leave."

Court assemblies weren't held every day. Generally, a diligent monarch would hold a grand court assembly every three days at a fixed time.

A more negligent monarch might hold court every five to ten days.

Under Emperor Yuanjing, early morning court sessions had become rare. He would only call for one when in the mood to address state affairs, typically notifying officials a day in advance.

When a court assembly was called on such short notice, it usually signified something important.

After finishing his tea, Wei Yuan called for Nangong Qianrou and entered the palace with his adopted son.

By quarter to eight, they arrived at the Meridian Gate. The plaza was already filled with capital officials, who were whispering among themselves, speculating on the reason for Emperor Yuanjing's sudden court assembly.

Most were guessing it had to do with the Consort Fu case. It was the most significant issue recently.

This case was tied to the Crown Prince and the stability of the state. Only such a matter could prompt Emperor Yuanjing, who had long neglected state affairs, to suddenly call a court assembly and summon his ministers for discussion.

"Duke Wei."

The Right Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate approached cautiously, glancing around nervously before whispering, "There's news from the palace. Last night, His Majesty went to the Fengqi Palace, but left in a furious rage."

Wei Yuan's expression subtly changed, and he nodded slowly, "I see."

Chapter 250. Brainstorming

On the dot of eight, the side gate of the Meridian Gate slowly opened. An elderly eunuch walked to the entrance and loudly announced, "Court is in session!"

The noise instantly ceased, and the civil and military officials entered the side gate in an orderly fashion, with the civil officials on the left and the military officials on the right, clearly separated.

After entering the Meridian Gate, officials of the fourth rank and above proceeded into the hall, while those below the fourth rank remained at the entrance, and those below the sixth rank stayed in the plaza.

The ministers entered the hall and waited for a quarter of an hour before Emperor Yuanjing finally arrived, fashionably late.

A cluster of gazes fell upon their emperor, trying to discern clues from his expression or demeanour.

All attempts failed. Emperor Yuanjing had been on the throne for thirty-seven years, his mind was unfathomably deep, and his experience vast. There were very few in the court who could match wits with him.

Perhaps only Wei Yuan and Prime Minister Wang.

This court session started off no differently than usual, with the ministers presenting their reports and the emperor responding as usual.

"Your Majesty, thousands have frozen to death in Chuzhou during the harsh winter. The Provincial Administration Commissioner has exhausted the funds allocated for disaster relief. We humbly request Your Majesty to issue a decree, instructing the Ministry of Revenue to allocate funds..."

"The national treasury is empty. For disaster relief, you may seek donations from the local gentry..." Emperor Yuanjing replied.

"Your Majesty, the northern barbarians have repeatedly violated our borders. As spring approaches, border conflicts are becoming increasingly intense. We must remain vigilant."

"Your Majesty, the Zhenbei King has ignored the barbarian raids on our borders, stubbornly defending the city without deploying a single soldier. This has led to widespread displacement and heavy casualties among the border populace. We beseech Your Majesty to hold him accountable."

Upon hearing this, Emperor Yuanjing looked at Wei Yuan, his voice void of emotion, "Duke Wei, what is the situation with the northern barbarians?"

Wei Yuan frowned slightly and replied, "At the end of last year, the north experienced heavy snowfall for several months, killing countless livestock. I anticipated at the time that the barbarians would raid southward."

Emperor Yuanjing suddenly remembered this and frowned, "And what of the aftermath? The barbarians invaded the border, so why did the Nightwatchers not receive any prior intelligence?"

"It was your servant's oversight," Wei Yuan replied.

In truth, he had withdrawn his informants from the north, redeploying them to the northeast.

Emperor Yuanjing coldly declared, "For failing to detect the invasion south of the northern barbarians, Wei Yuan is relieved of his duties as Left Censor-in-Chief and will forfeit a year's salary."

The hall fell silent for a moment as countless questions swirled through the ministers' minds.

Although the Nightwatchers were responsible for gathering intelligence, this was only a secondary duty. Furthermore, with the northern barbarians invading, and the Zhenbei King refusing to fight, even knowing in advance wouldn't have made much difference. How could this blame be pinned on Wei Yuan?

However, since it was rare for Emperor Yuanjing to target Wei Yuan, the civil officials seized the opportunity, quickly attacking Wei Yuan and loudly praising the emperor's wisdom.

A censor stepped forward and emphasised, "Your Majesty, the Zhenbei King turned a blind eye to the people's suffering caused by the military disaster. We implore Your Majesty to hold him accountable."

Emperor Yuanjing's response was a mere three words, "We are aware."

The censor reluctantly retreated.

As the court session neared its end and the piled-up administrative matters were resolved, the ministers ceased their petitions. Emperor Yuanjing raised his index finger and gently tapped the table.

An elderly eunuch, dressed in a serpent robe, stepped forward and surveyed the ministers.

It's coming... The ministers inside the hall all felt a twinge in their hearts.

The earlier proceedings had been routine, and while it was surprising that Wei Yuan was relieved of his position as Left Censor-in-Chief, Emperor Yuanjing's sudden call for a court session was definitely not for this "small matter."

The elderly eunuch unrolled the imperial decree in his hands and read aloud, "We have thoroughly investigated the Consort Fu case. It has been found that Empress Shangguan orchestrated the murder of Consort Fu by instructing palace maid Huang Xiaorou and framing the Crown Prince...

"After rigorous questioning, Empress Shangguan has confessed to her crimes. The Empress has lost her moral compass and is unfit to bear the Mandate of Heaven. She is hereby stripped of her seal and will retire to Changchun Palace."

Changchun Palace was the Cold Palace.

Inside and outside the hall, there was a dead silence.

From the First Rank Grand Ministers down to the ministers outside the hall, everyone who heard the contents of the decree was stunned.

In the midst of the silence, a low voice broke out:

"Your Majesty, this cannot be."

Emperor Yuanjing squinted his eyes, expressionless as he looked at the azure cloak who had just stepped out of line.

Wei Yuan, with greying temples and eyes reflecting the weariness of countless years, locked gazes with Emperor Yuanjing.

It was unclear how much time passed before the Minister of Law and the Chief Justice of the High Court simultaneously stepped forward, loudly declaring, "Your Majesty, the Consort Fu case has not been examined by the Three Judicial Offices. It cannot be decided lightly."

Emperor Yuanjing replied slowly, word by word, "This is our family matter."

The newly appointed Minister of Rites swiftly stepped forward, bowed, and loudly proclaimed, "Your Majesty, deposing the Empress is also a matter of state importance. It must not be done hastily. We beseech Your Majesty to submit the Consort Fu case to the Three Judicial Offices for review before making a final decision."

Though the decree stated that the Empress had confessed, deposing the Empress was a serious matter. Without knowing the full circumstances, the ministers were unwilling to support Emperor Yuanjing in this decision.

"Very well!"

.....

In the early morning, Xu Xinnian finished washing up and headed to the back hall for breakfast. From a distance, he saw Xu Lingyin, dressed in her little skirt, sitting on the steps outside the hall, pouting angrily.

Her small figure looked lonely and pitiful.

"Lingyin, why are you sitting here?" Xu Xinnian asked.

Xu Lingyin looked up at him but didn't respond.

"Second Brother is asking you a question." Xu Xinnian frowned.

"Mother kicked me out and even hit me," Xu Lingyin complained. "Second Brother, can you scold Mother for me?"

Xu Xinnian shook his head.

The little girl's expression turned to one of resignation as she scrunched her nose and said, "If Big Brother were home, it would be better. Big Brother likes to bully Mother the most."

Xu Xinnian entered the hall and sat in his usual spot. After Lyu'e served him a bowl of porridge, he asked while eating, "Mother, did Lingyin make you angry again?"

"No, it's your Big Brother who made me angry," Auntie replied coldly.

"Big Brother hasn't even come home..."

Auntie sneered, "That's exactly your Big Brother's skill. He can make me furious even when he's not here."

Xu Xinnian glanced at his sister and father, who were both silently eating their porridge, and asked, "What happened?"

Xu Lingyue whispered, "Lingyin was eating buns this morning. She took a bite and then spit it out, saying that this way she wouldn't get hungry and could keep eating forever."

"Did Big Brother teach her that?" Xu Xinnian twitched at the corner of his mouth.

Xu Lingyue nodded.

Uncle Xu added, "After Lingyin spat it out, she felt it was a pity and tried to pick it up to eat it again, which got her a beating from your mother."

Xu Xinnian: ...

He looked under the table and indeed found a few chewed-up pieces of bun.

"Big Brother didn't come home last night either," Xu Lingyue said gloomily.

Xu Erlang and Xu Pingzhi exchanged a glance and said in unison, "He's definitely at the Jiaofangsi."

...

Xu Qi'an woke up in a side room at the Nightwatcher constabulary. The spacious courtyard was quiet, with only an old clerk hunching over to sweep the yard.

This duvet hasn't been washed in ages; it smells awful. Public dormitories are the worst.

He disdainfully tossed the duvet aside, unsteadily got out of bed, and opened the window to let the sunlight in.

This was the public dormitory of the Nightwatcher constabulary, a place for clerks and Nightwatchers to rest when they worked overtime. Only Gold Gongs had their own rooms; the rest of the rooms were shared.

The hygiene wasn't great, and who knew how many generations of people had been buried under those thick cotton blankets.

Thanks to the Sitianjian's miraculous medicine and his own robust physique, the penetrating wound in his left shoulder had already scabbed over and would heal in a few more days. However, the exhaustion from using the "One blade from heaven and earth" hadn't fully recovered, leaving him feeling drained.

Xu Qi'an poured himself a cup of tea to rinse his mouth, then went to the yard to fetch a bucket of icy clear well water to wash his face before heading to Spring Breeze Hall.

"Ah, much better..."

After finishing the hearty breakfast delivered by a clerk, Xu Qi'an patted his bulging belly and contentedly sprawled in Li Yuchun's chair, propping his feet up on the desk.

Only now did he have time to think about last night's assassination attempt.

Usually, I leave the palace at four, but yesterday, I left after six because I was checking the list of people who had entered and exited the Imperial Pharmacy.

It's not surprising that the assassins knew my route home; I take that road every day. But how did they time it so perfectly?

Nightwatchers frequently patrol the rooftops, so the three assassins couldn't have been lying in wait for me all along, or they would have been spotted by the night patrols.

Clearly, they knew exactly when I left the palace... The mastermind is likely someone from within the palace; otherwise, how could they have known this detail?

Is it the Empress? Yesterday, I uncovered something unfavorable to her, and she immediately sent people to kill me... Does she want to stop me from investigating further?

If it really was the Empress, then I'll have no choice but to divorce Huaqing.

Xu Qi'an rubbed his temples.

At that moment, a black-clad clerk entered Spring Breeze Hall. Seeing Xu Qi'an inside, he breathed a sigh of relief. "I just went to the back courtyard looking for you, Sir Xu, but couldn't find you. I thought you had left the constabulary."

Xu Qi'an, still reclining with his legs on the desk, half-closed his eyes. "I'm not going to the palace to investigate today; I'll wait until my injuries are healed."

The clerk nodded and said, "Duke Wei is looking for you. Please go to the Tower of Noble Spirit first."

Ah, it seems that Duke Wei has already learned about the assassination attempt last night. He must be amazed at my achievements... Xu Qi'an put his legs down, stood up from the chair, and said, "Lead the way."

Following the clerk to the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi'an skilfully climbed to the seventh floor, only to find that besides Wei Yuan, there were two unexpected guests in the tea room.

Princess Huaqing, as elegant and noble as a snow lotus; and the Fourth Prince, Emperor Yuanjing's proper son, who was handsome and reserved.

Though he was Huaqing's elder brother, the Fourth Prince's features bore little resemblance to his sister's, though he did bear a slight resemblance to Emperor Yuanjing.

Huaqing, on the other hand, looked somewhat similar to the Empress, though their temperaments were vastly different, making the resemblance barely noticeable.

All three of them looked extremely grim. Wei Yuan held a teacup, head bowed in silence, seemingly unaware of Xu Qi'an's arrival. The Fourth Prince turned at the sound and nodded slightly at him.

Huaqing also did not look at Xu Qi'an, her brows furrowed in deep thought.

"Duke Wei," Xu Qi'an cupped his fists.

Wei Yuan finally raised his head, pointed to the seat beside Huaqing, and said warmly, "Sit down."

Xu Qi'an took a seat.

"You were attacked last night?" Wei Yuan pushed the teapot toward Xu Qi'an, indicating that he should pour himself some tea.

Having just eaten his fill, Xu Qi'an poured a cup of tea but did not drink it. He nodded and said, "The mastermind behind it is related to the Consort Fu case and is someone within the palace."

"You suspect the Empress?"

Wei Yuan's question was too direct, and for a moment, Xu Qi'an didn't know how to respond. He cautiously glanced at Huaqing.

Huaqing still did not look at him, lost in thought.

Right now, the Princess looks just like a woman facing a divorce... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

"Today, His Majesty proposed deposing the Empress during the court session, claiming that the real culprit behind the Consort Fu case was the Empress," Wei Yuan said.

"???"

Xu Qi'an stared at him in shock, his first thought being: *How long did I sleep?*

How could everything have changed so drastically after just one nap? It felt like he had slept for a century.

He had personally investigated the Consort Fu case, meticulously piecing together each clue. He wasn't even certain that the Empress was the culprit, so how could Emperor Yuanjing be so sure?

Did he think he was Conan or Di Renjie?

But then, something Princess Huaqing said left Xu Qi'an even more bewildered.

"Mother admitted to it."

The f- what did you say?

Xu Qi'an waved his hand, "Sorry, I need a moment to process this..."

He thought for a long time before tentatively asking, "His Majesty wants to depose the Empress because the real culprit behind the Consort Fu case was the Empress, and the Empress actually admitted to it?"

The Fourth Prince nodded.

"Could she have been forced to?" Xu Qi'an speculated.

"No," Wei Yuan shook his head, his eyes, filled with the wear of years, looking at him as he spoke in a deep voice:

"You personally investigated the Consort Fu case. No one knows the clues and details better than you. Think carefully, is there anything suspicious or unreasonable about it? Today, Their Highnesses came to the headquarters not only to discuss the deposing of the Empress with me but also with the intention of asking for your help.

"His Majesty hasn't revoked your golden token yet. The officials need time to confirm this matter, so you still have time to investigate the case."

Huaqing and the Fourth Prince both looked at Xu Qi'an.

The Fourth Prince clasped his hands and bowed, "We must trouble you, Sir Xu."

Xu Qi'an ignored him and looked at Huaqing instead.

The Princess, as graceful and pure as a lotus flower, scrutinised him with her autumn water-like eyes, "How are your injuries?"

She didn't mention the case but rather expressed concern for Xu Qi'an's injuries.

Considering your sincere apology, I won't go through with the divorce... Xu Qi'an nodded,

"Thank you for your concern, Your Highness. Your servant is fine."

After a pause, he continued, "In the Consort Fu case, the Empress indeed had ample motive and reason to frame the Crown Prince. And based on the clues I uncovered yesterday, the mastermind indeed points to the Empress."

The Fourth Prince interrupted excitedly, "Impossible, Mother would never do such a thing."

"Calm down, Your Highness, I haven't finished," Xu Qi'an said, turning his gaze to Huaiqing. "Does His Majesty have any evidence?"

Huaiqing shook her head, "No, it was Mother who admitted to it."

Xu Qi'an frowned, "That's odd. If His Majesty has no evidence, why would the Empress admit to it? And since the Empress has already confessed, why would she still send someone to assassinate me?"

That creates a paradox.

The Fourth Prince sighed and said, "It's precisely because we don't know that we've come to you. Sir Xu, you've solved many perplexing cases. If there's anyone in the capital who can uncover the truth quickly and clear our mother's name, it's you."

Xu Qi'an took his first sip of tea since sitting down and slowly responded, "When I first took over this case, I thought the Consort Fu case had only two possibilities: One, the Crown Prince did indeed lose control after drinking and killed Consort Fu.

"Or two, someone framed the Crown Prince to seize the position of Crown Prince.

"After investigating the Qingfeng Palace where Consort Fu resided, I could confirm that the Crown Prince was indeed framed. So, the case falls into the second category—someone wanted to frame the Crown Prince.

"Following this line of reasoning, all the clues inevitably pointed to the Empress. To be honest with both of you, just now, I was also suspecting the Empress, thinking she might have sent assassins to kill me.

"But after learning that the Empress confessed to being the mastermind, I started to doubt the case. The mastermind's goal isn't just to frame the Crown Prince—it's a plot with more layers.

"But here's a question: The Empress lives a reclusive life, and the Fourth Prince isn't the Crown Prince, so why would the mastermind target the Empress? What could they possibly gain? It can't be for the position of the chief consort in the harem, can it?"

After all, with an Emperor who has been abstinent for over a decade, does the title of the chief consort even hold any significance?

Wei Yuan put down his teacup and sighed, "Firstly, whether the Fourth Prince is the Crown Prince or not, he is still the legitimate eldest son of the Emperor. Secondly, the mastermind is targeting me."

"???" Xu Qi'an looked at him in confusion.

Wei Yuan paused for a moment, then explained, "The Wei family and the Shangguan family are old family friends. The Empress's surname is Shangguan."

I see, so Wei Yuan and the Empress are political allies, making Wei Yuan an in-law of sorts... No wonder Princess Huaqing is half a disciple of Wei Yuan... So the Consort Fu case, on the surface, is a scheme to frame the Crown Prince, but in reality, it targets Wei Yuan?

Wei Yuan undoubtedly belongs to the Fourth Prince's Clique... Taking down both the Crown Prince Clique and the Fourth Prince Clique with one case—impressive... Xu Qi'an marveled internally.

"Today, during the morning court assembly, the Emperor dismissed Sir Wei from his position as Left Censor-in-Chief," Princess Huaqing said.

Hmm, that doesn't make sense... Even if the mastermind wanted to weaken Wei Yuan by taking down the Empress, that would be a roundabout way to reduce his power. But why would the Emperor immediately strip Wei Yuan of an important title the moment the Empress was in trouble? It almost seems like the Emperor himself is the mastermind... Wait a minute, assuming the Empress is the mastermind behind framing the Crown Prince and her intent was to support the Fourth Prince as the Crown Prince.

Once the Emperor learned of this, he immediately weakened and admonished Wei Yuan... What does this imply?

It implies that the Emperor is wary of Wei Yuan.

Xu Qi'an suddenly understood why the Emperor chose to make a son of a concubine the Crown Prince rather than the Fourth Prince, who was born of the Empress.

The Empress and Wei Yuan are political allies; if I were in his shoes, I'd be uneasy too.

Reining in his wandering thoughts, Xu Qi'an focused on the case again, mentally retracing the Consort Fu case.

As Xu Qi'an sank into contemplation, the tea room fell silent, with only the soft sounds of the four breathing.

The Crown Prince drank with Noble Consort Chen and encountered Huang Xiaorou on his way back. He was invited to Consort Fu's Qingfeng Palace... At that moment, the Crown Prince indeed had improper thoughts about his father's woman.

Then Consort Fu fell to her death, and the Crown Prince became a suspect, detained by the High Court.

After I discovered that Consort Fu had been murdered and that the Crown Prince was framed, Huang Xiaorou's body was found at the Xie Pavilion the next day... too convenient, far too convenient.

No wonder I felt something was off at the time. Huang Xiaorou was silenced, not a suicide. So why did the perpetrator choose to dispose of the body at Xie Pavilion?

If the aim was to silence her, secretly burying the body would have been better than throwing it into a well. Even more, there are dozens, if not hundreds, of stone wells in the inner palace—why choose a well in a busy, populated area like Xie Pavilion?

This was intentional, deliberately leading us to discover the connection between Huang Xiaorou and the Empress.

Was my initial guess wrong? Huang Xiaorou wasn't the killer of Consort Fu; she was just a tool, a decoy to make us suspect the Empress?

No, Huang Xiaorou did indeed lure the Crown Prince to Qingfeng Palace. The Crown Prince might lie, but his guards wouldn't. This is too easy to verify. Also, setting up the scene, sabotaging the railing, being familiar with Consort Fu's habits, and knowing she would be affectionate with the "fake husband"—all of this had to be the work of a close maidservant.

If the Empress wasn't behind all this, why did she confess? Perhaps there's something that forced her to admit it.

What is the Empress afraid of? It must be related to this case. The three key people involved are Consort Fu, the Crown Prince, and the maid Huang Xiaorou.

And among these three, the only one connected to the Empress is Huang Xiaorou...

Huang Xiaorou?!

Various chaotic thoughts and speculations flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind as he pieced together the clues from the case, step by step.

Realising something, Xu Qi'an pulled out a piece of dull yellow silk cloth from his robe.

Embroidered on it were bright red lotuses and the words: "Spring, 31st year of Yuanjing"

Princess Huaqing's eyes were fixed on the yellow silk cloth. "This was found on the body of the maid Huang Xiaorou."

"That's right!" Xu Qi'an nodded, glancing at the three people present, finally focusing on Princess Huaqing. In a solemn tone, he said, "Your Highness, we only know that the Empress saved Huang Xiaorou, but there are two more crucial points to note, did your Highness see them?"

Princess Huaqing shook her head.

"First, why did the Empress save Huang Xiaorou?"

"My mother has always been kind-hearted. It's not surprising that she would use precious elixirs to save a maid," Princess Huaqing replied.

The Empress might be a good person, but that's not the main point... Xu Qi'an shook his head and said, "Then why did the Empress take a particular interest in a maid and even assign someone from Fengqi Palace to watch over her?"

"We asked, but my mother refused to answer," Princess Huaqing frowned.

"Second, why did the maid Huang Xiaorou take her own life?" Xu Qi'an pointed at the yellow silk cloth and said in a grave tone, "The answer lies right here."