

Nightwatcher 251

Chapter 251. Common Medical Knowledge

Huaiqing's elegant brows furrowed slightly, as following Xu Qi'an's hand, she looked at the dull yellow-coloured silk cloth, her cold clear voice tinged with urgency: "What did you discover?"

Xu Qi'an shrugged, "I suspect the key lies in this piece of cloth, but I don't yet know what secret it holds."

A look of confusion flashed through Huaiqing's beautiful eyes, unsure why he had spoken so firmly earlier.

Wei Yuan's gaze followed the yellow silk cloth and he said, "This material can only be used by imperial concubines ranked above third grade."

In the palace, concubines also had ranks. At the top were the Empress, the Imperial Noble Consort, and the Noble Consorts. Those with fixed titles, like Consort Fu, held the First Grade.

Below them were madams, noble ladies, and esteemed attendants, all within the Third Grade.

The hierarchy of beauties in the harem touched upon Xu Qi'an's knowledge blind spot, but it wasn't a big problem. He asked, "So, how would a palace maid come to have such material?"

The Fourth Prince responded, "Either it was bestowed by someone of high rank, or it was stolen."

Xu Qi'an nodded.

Wei Yuan took the dull-coloured, somewhat aged yellow silk cloth and examined it, "Spring, 31st year of Yuanjing..."

"Was there any significant event that year? I mean in the palace," Xu Qi'an had a sudden idea and directly asked if anything major had happened that year.

This inspiration came from the last time when the Empress was deposed.

In the 13th year of Yuanjing, the Empress was banished to the Cold Palace.

The following year, Wei Yuan went on an expedition, decisively defeating the northern barbarians and returning in triumph. The Empress was then released from the Cold Palace. If not for this understanding, Xu Qi'an would have racked his brains, only to guess that Emperor Yuanjing had pardoned the Empress out of old affection.

So, the material left by the palace maid Huang Xiaorou, embroidered with "31st year of Yuanjing," might hold clues from the major events of that year.

Wei Yuan and Huaiqing shook their heads simultaneously.

"Think again?" Xu Qi'an was unwilling to give up.

The two still shook their heads.

Alright, if these two academic powerhouses dismissed it, there was probably no hope... After all, how could a mere palace maid be connected to significant events?

Xu Qi'an licked his lips, feeling a bit excited.

The Consort Fu case had finally entered a challenging phase. The previous clues had all been intentionally thrown out by the mastermind, making the case itself not too difficult.

In other words, even if he hadn't taken over the case, someone else could have figured it out—the difference would only be in the time it took.

But now, stepping out of the mastermind's guidance, it was finally Freeloader Xu's turn to showcase his skills.

Wait...

Suddenly, a flash of insight struck Xu Qi'an, and he realised he had overlooked a detail.

He straightened his back, his expression serious, "Duke Wei, I have something I need to ask."

Seeing his favored Bronze Gong being so serious, Wei Yuan put down his teacup and replied warmly, "Speak."

"Before your servant returned to the capital, the Consort Fu case was being delayed, with the three departments shirking responsibility, unwilling to investigate. If, hypothetically, I had died, would this case have been pinned on the Crown Prince?"

Initially, Xu Qi'an thought the case was so significant that the three departments didn't want to take it on. It wasn't until he was resurrected and happened to take over this hot potato that he reconsidered.

When he saw the Crown Prince that day, the High Court Minister had also sarcastically remarked that he was just a pawn.

Wei Yuan picked up his teacup again, took a slow sip, and said, "Today, the Emperor wants to depose the Empress, but the three departments and the ministers do not agree. They believe the three departments should first verify the facts before discussing the deposition. It shouldn't be the Emperor's decision alone.

"The ministers' reasoning can be summarised in three points: First, the deposition of the Empress is a major event and should follow proper procedures, not be done hastily. Second, the ministers despise such sudden incidents, which make them feel they don't have enough control over the court. Third, they need time to plan for the aftermath of the Empress's deposition."

So, the relationship between the monarch and his ministers has always been like a chess game...
Xu Qi'an understood, "So, the Crown Prince's situation is similar?"

Wei Yuan nodded, "The matter of the Crown Prince concerns the foundation of the nation. How could it be resolved in just three days as the Emperor says? The three departments are not refusing to investigate; they are telling the Emperor they need time."

"...So, I was never needed. Even if I hadn't returned, someone would have taken over this case in a few days. Then, following the clues provided by the true mastermind, they would have traced it step by step back to the Empress."

Xu Qi'an's words made the Fourth Prince widen his eyes in surprise.

Wei Yuan seemed lost in thought.

"So, the assassination attempt on you last night was because the mastermind doesn't want you to investigate further. They are afraid." Princess Huaqing pierced through to Xu Qi'an's suspicion.

"Afraid?" The Fourth Prince was puzzled.

"Sir Xu's resurrection was beyond the mastermind's expectations, and his reputation is too great. The mastermind doesn't dare let him continue investigating. Thus, when the clues pointed to the Empress, they immediately sent assassins to eliminate Sir Xu."

Huaqing explained to her brother.

"I see."

The Fourth Prince then asked, "So, how do we proceed with the investigation?"

Wei Yuan and Huaqing didn't speak, looking towards Xu Qi'an.

They were all extremely intelligent, but solving the case required a professional.

Just like how Xu Qi'an often thought his intelligence rivaled Einstein's, but he would admit that building an atomic bomb was just a tad beyond him—it required professional scientists.

Meeting their gazes, Detective Xu Ningyan said in a deep voice, "I must conduct an exhumation."

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Imperial Palace.

The Fourth Prince and Princess Huaqing escorted Xu Qi'an into the palace. As the carriage passed through the palace gates, Xu Qi'an lifted the curtain and suggested, "We should inform that little eunuch. After all, this is a rule set by His Majesty."

The Fourth Prince thought for a moment, then nodded. "Indeed, Sir Xu is a man who abides by laws and regulations, loyal to the Great Feng and to my father, the Emperor."

You're overthinking it. I'm just being cautious... Xu Qi'an was touched and said, "The Fourth Prince has a keen insight."

Princess Huaqing was in another carriage; after all, it would be improper for an unmarried princess to ride in the same carriage as a young man. If not for the presence of the Fourth Prince, Xu Qi'an might have thickened his skin and tried to request to share a carriage with the princess.

The Fourth Prince immediately sent someone to inform the eunuch. A quarter of an hour later, the little eunuch, dressed in light blue flying fish robes, came running over.

He looked at Xu Qi'an in confusion and said, "Sir Xu, hasn't the case already been closed?"

Xu Qi'an replied, "As long as His Majesty hasn't revoked the gold token, I will continue to investigate."

"Al- alright then..."

The little eunuch didn't want to take on this task again; he still wanted to live a few more years. But with Princess Huaqing and the Fourth Prince both present, he didn't dare refuse and reluctantly followed Xu Qi'an to the icehouse.

As they neared the icehouse, Xu Qi'an suddenly ordered, "Go fetch an old nanny."

After dismissing the little eunuch, Xu Qi'an, Princess Huaiqing, and the Fourth Prince entered the icehouse and saw the corpse of the palace maid, Huang Xiaorou.

The incision marks on her neck and chest had already been sewn up.

"His Majesty re-examined the body," Xu Qi'an said, staring at the corpse of the palace maid.

Seeing the bloated, pale corpse, the Fourth Prince frowned repeatedly and looked away.

"What more do you need to examine?" Princess Huaiqing asked, her expression unchanged.

"Do you remember the 'rule' I mentioned to you during yesterday's autopsy?" Xu Qi'an called over the eunuch in charge of the icehouse and said, "Take her outside; the light here is too dim."

Princess Huaiqing hesitated for a moment, then understood Xu Qi'an's intent, a faint blush creeping onto her pale cheeks.

She knew what Xu Qi'an intended to do.

Two eunuchs came in from outside, carried out the crude wooden plank, and placed the corpse in the courtyard, exposed to the sunlight.

Xu Qi'an let the corpse sit in the sunlight for a moment until the little eunuch returned with an old nanny, which made Xu Qi'an grin.

It was the old nanny whose driving skills surpassed even his own.

Upon seeing Princess Huaiqing and the Fourth Prince, the old nanny quickly bowed.

Then, she quietly complained to Xu Qi'an, "Sir, why have you called this old servant to examine the body again? I'm not a coroner; this is making me lose my appetite."

As she got closer and saw the bloated, ugly female corpse, the old nanny exclaimed, "Ah!" and covered her eyes. "I can't examine this! Please, Sir, don't make things difficult for me."

The Fourth Prince frowned and was about to reprimand her when Xu Qi'an waved his hand and then took out a piece of broken silver, about five cash in weight, placed it in his palm, and spread his hand out, smiling, "Nanny, can you examine it?"

"This old servant is always happy to serve you, Sir," the old nanny said pleasantly. "What would you like me to examine?"

Xu Qi'an pointed at the female corpse, "Examine whether she was intact."

The old nanny wrapped her hands in rough cloth, separated the legs of the female corpse...

The Fourth Prince and Princess Huaiqing both turned away, not watching the process.

About ten seconds later, they heard the old nanny exclaim, "This body was not a virgin."

Not a virgin... Princess Huaiqing and the Fourth Prince exchanged glances, both shocked and astonished.

The so-called three thousand beauties of the harem included the palace maids. Throughout history, there were countless examples of emperors favouring palace maids, and in the five hundred years since the founding of the Great Feng, there were many concubines who had once been palace maids.

Although Huang Xiaorou was an insignificant palace maid, she was, in essence, one of the Emperor's women, the private property of Emperor Yuanjing.

All the women in the harem belonged to the Emperor. Whether they were favored or not was one thing, but the system was set up this way.

Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up, as if a certain suspicion of his had been confirmed. He stepped forward and said, "Nanny, take a look and see if she was ever pregnant."

"This..." The old nanny glanced at the bloated female corpse, her wrinkled face scrunching up. "This old servant can't tell."

What use are you? Give me back the silver... Xu Qi'an grumbled in his heart, hesitated for a moment, then sighed, "Forget it. Move aside, I'll do it myself."

He then took over from the old nanny and separated the female corpse's legs himself.

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A quarter of an hour later, in the courtyard, Xu Qi'an had his hands submerged in a bucket of water, scrubbing them vigorously over and over. A square piece of soap in his hands was getting smaller and smaller with each use.

Princess Huaiqing, dressed in a white palace robe and standing tall, was beside him. The cool breeze tugged at her skirt and gently tousled her hair. Her appearance was pristine and of extraordinary beauty.

"How much longer are you going to wash?" Huaiqing's voice carried a hint of exasperation.

"Until I scrub off a layer of skin," Xu Qi'an retorted.

Though his middle and ring fingers had once traversed muddy roads, they did not deserve the indignity they had just endured.

"It's all that old nanny's fault. She has little skill and yet swindled me out of five qian of silver. Your Highness, you should reimburse me," Xu Qi'an grumbled.

Ignoring his complaints, Huaiqing asked, "You said she had been pregnant. What evidence do you have?"

"There are several indicators. When a woman becomes pregnant, faint stretch marks, known as striae gravidarum, appear on the lower abdomen and inner thighs."

"If that's the case, why didn't that old nanny notice them earlier?" Huaiqing asked.

"With proper care, stretch marks can fade. The ones on Huang Xiaorou were very faint, and with the body being bloated from water, they became even harder to discern. Even I couldn't be sure, so it's understandable that the nanny couldn't see them either," Xu Qi'an explained while still scrubbing his hands. "Another point—during yesterday's autopsy, I showed Your Highness the scars beneath Huang Xiaorou's breasts... remember the gesture I made?"

Xu Qi'an mimicked the upward flipping motion he had used.

Huaiqing blushed slightly. This man always behaved so improperly in front of her. No matter how unconcerned she appeared, she was still an unmarried princess.

"Of course, some women with exceptional physical traits can also achieve that size, so this point is only a reference," Xu Qi'an added in his mind: *Your Highness, you happen to be one of those women with exceptional traits.*

"Then why did you personally examine the body just now?" Huaiqing inquired. If it was only for those two points, there was no need for Xu Qi'an to act himself.

Xu Qi'an fell silent.

Aside from stretch marks, whether a woman has given birth can also be determined by the shape of the cervix.

This was not an easy topic to discuss; it was too academic, like when he had once explained to Xu Lingyin the differences between boys and girls growing up, using simple and understandable language.

"Before a woman gives birth, it's like a young bird with its mouth open, waiting to be fed. After giving birth, it becomes satisfied, and the mouth closes," Xu Qi'an carefully worded his explanation.

"???" Huaiqing looked at him, bewildered.

Xu Qi'an scratched his head, "Princess, have you read any medical books?"

Huaiqing gave him a cold look, "Yesterday, when you suddenly had a headache during the autopsy, didn't I tell you that I have some knowledge of medicine?"

"Oh, oh, that makes it simple," Xu Qi'an clapped his hands and smiled, "A woman who hasn't given birth has a cervix shaped like an 'O'. After giving birth, it becomes a horizontal line."

This explanation was easily understood by the intelligent Princess Huaiqing, but recalling his earlier crass description, she felt unwilling to engage further with him.

The Fourth Prince, who lacked medical knowledge, nodded vaguely, "Sir Xu, you are indeed learned and talented."

This piece of knowledge came from a case of passion-driven murder in Xu Qi'an's previous life. The victim had been a woman involved with two men at once, following in the footsteps of Brother Cheng. The old forensic doctor had dissected the body and said, "Even though she wasn't married, someone had already lived in her house."

At that time, Xu Qi'an, serving as an assistant, had asked the old doctor to teach him more, leading to this bit of knowledge.

"I've had Huang Xiaorou investigated. She entered the palace in the 28th year of Yuanjing..." Xu Qi'an glanced at the two royals.

The implication was that someone had dared to infringe upon Emperor Yuanjing's territory.

By the 28th year of Yuanjin, the old emperor had long since practiced abstinence and cultivation. He had refrained from touching even the most beautiful empress and the stunning Noble Consort Chen, so how could he possibly have taken interest in a mere palace maid?

"Who could it be?" The Fourth Prince fell into deep thought.

Xu Qi'an silently observed him.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" The Fourth Prince felt insulted.

Xu Qi'an averted his gaze and analyzed, "This person is actually easy to identify. He must meet two conditions: First, he must have relatively free access to the inner palace, which fits a member of the royal family.

"Second, he must be bold and act with impunity; otherwise, he wouldn't dare target a palace maid."

At this moment, Huaiqing suddenly said, "Brother, we wish to speak with Sir Xu privately."

The Fourth Prince frowned, glanced at his sister, and slowly nodded, "Very well, we'll take our leave."

After watching the Fourth Prince leave, Huaiqing cast a cold glance at Yuanjing Emperor's spy—the little eunuch.

"Get out."

The little eunuch bowed his head and left silently.

Once everyone had been dismissed, Huaiqing fixed her gaze on Xu Qi'an, her expression solemn, "Sir Xu, Huang Xiaorou's suicide, and my mother's confession, are most likely related to this man."

Xu Qi'an stirred the water in the bucket, his pupils dilating as he lost focus, "Your Highness is being too subjective. Investigations must be conducted calmly, forming hypotheses based on clues. We've now discovered that Huang Xiaorou was once pregnant, so let's assume that the man involved was not His Majesty, but someone else.

"Assuming that Huang Xiaorou's suicide and the Empress saving her, even confessing, were all because of this man. Then he must meet another condition:

"This man has a close relationship with the Empress but little connection to His Majesty. He can enter the inner palace, but if he causes trouble, His Majesty would not hesitate to execute him.

"The Fourth Prince is His Majesty's legitimate son. Even if he molested a palace maid, His Majesty wouldn't kill him in anger. The Empress wouldn't have to 'confess' because there would be no need."

At this point, he looked up and met Huaiqing's clear, autumn-like eyes, "Does Your Highness have anyone in mind?"

Huaiqing's face darkened, and she coldly replied, "I have someone in mind."

Chapter 252. The Truth

As expected, Huaiqing, as the Empress's daughter, surely had some clues about the man her mother was so determined to protect, even at the cost of being banished to the Cold Palace.

If I'm Sherlock Holmes, then Huaiqing, you're my Watson... Xu Qi'an nodded and pressed, "Who is it?"

Huaiqing's already cold face grew even more expressionless, her tone detached as she uttered two words: "Imperial Uncle."

The mention of "Imperial Uncle" was like the key that unlocked the entire mystery, making everything suddenly clear to Xu Qi'an. The Consort Fu case finally made sense.

"This Imperial Uncle would be the Empress's younger brother or elder brother, right." Xu Qi'an clicked his tongue.

Only a full-blooded sibling could make the Empress take the blame to protect him.

Princess Huaiqing gave a slight nod, "The Imperial Uncle is mother's younger brother, a debauched scoundrel, frivolous and uneducated, overly indulgent in women. The maids at Fengqi Palace despise him because whenever he visits my mother, he always harasses them."

In her words, there was clear disdain and loathing for this uncle of hers.

"Only now do we recall a few things. The Imperial Uncle used to visit my mother occasionally, but a few years ago, he suddenly stopped. Looking back, it all makes sense now."

Apart from the Imperial family, relatives of the Empress, Noble Consorts and regular Consorts could also enter the palace to visit them, as long as they reported to the palace beforehand.

Xu Qi'an squatted down, his hands soaking in the bucket of water, staring at the sky at a 45-degree angle, murmuring:

"Palace maid Huang Xiaorou was raped by the Imperial Uncle and became pregnant. She was so devastated that she tried to kill herself, but the Empress had people watching over her and saved her in time... No, that's not right."

Huaiqing, on the contrary, looked down at her feet and softly asked, "Didn't you say she gave birth? But what about a miscarriage? If she miscarried, would the... cervical opening also close?"

"A maid's pregnancy is hard to hide, but if Huang Xiaorou managed to last until now, it means the child wasn't born."

Xu Qi'an responded with a hum, "Stretch marks would have appeared after three or four months, and after a miscarriage, the cervical opening would close. I'm more inclined to think the Empress had the child aborted because allowing the child to be born would have been the end for the Imperial Uncle."

Huaiqing nodded, "So, palace maid Huang Xiaorou bore a deep grudge and teamed up with someone behind the scenes, superficially framing the Crown Prince but actually implicating the Empress and Duke Wei?"

"If that's the case, Huang Xiaorou must have hated the Empress deeply. Well, it makes sense—after all, there's no greater hatred than having one's child killed. But I still feel like it's not that simple."

"What do you want to ask?"

"You are extremely clever, Your Highness... Why didn't the Empress simply kill Huang Xiaorou? That would have solved everything."

“My mother is too soft-hearted.” Huaiqing sighed, her tone expressing both disappointment and regret.

So the Empress is a soft-hearted woman... If Huaiqing had been in her place, she probably would have killed Huang Xiaorou right away to eliminate future troubles... Huaiqing is a woman who can achieve great things; that much I can confirm. Xu Qi'an raised his hand to stroke his chin, paused halfway, then jabbed it back into the water and said:

“Now the case is clear. The Empress must be paying close attention to the Consort Fu case. When she discovered that Huang Xiaorou was behind it, she realised that the person behind the scenes intended to use the Imperial Uncle to take her down.

“This is an open plot. She must either sacrifice the Imperial Uncle or sacrifice herself. But, thinking about it, the Empress is truly a ‘brother-supporting demon.’[^1]”

Huaiqing frowned, “Brother- What does that mean?”

“It means she’s willing to be banished to the Cold Palace for the sake of an unworthy brother. Once she’s deposed, the Fourth Prince will no longer be the legitimate son, making him lose his claim to the throne.”

Huaiqing glanced at him and sneered, “For women in the harem, what’s the difference between living in the Cold Palace and not?”

“That’s true.” Xu Qi’an met Huaiqing’s gaze. This was the first time the Princess had shown discontent towards Emperor Yuanjing in front of him.

“My mother has never cared about harem affairs and doesn’t cling to her title as Empress. Trading her position for the Imperial Uncle’s life is something she’d willingly do. But the Fourth Prince will surely harbour resentment.”

“Is that why you sent the Fourth Prince away?”

Huaiqing nodded and asked, “What about the yellow silk cloth?”

“The spring of the 31st year of Yuanjing should be when palace maid Huang Xiaorou was assaulted... Wait, there’s something odd. Huang Xiaorou’s suicide happened four years ago, and Yuanjing 31 was five years ago. We shouldn’t count Yuanjing 37, as it’s just begun.” Xu Qi’an suddenly frowned.

Princess Huaiqing understood his implication and said in her pleasant voice, “Based on the timeline, it happened after she was forced to have an abortion. After my mother aborted Huang Xiaorou’s child, she assigned He’er to care for her.”

“That matches our findings, but doesn’t it seem strange to you, Your Highness? You just mentioned that pregnancy and childbirth in the palace are impossible to hide. What gave Huang Xiaorou the audacity to do this, unless she had someone powerful backing her?”

"It couldn't have been Father." Huaqing shook her head.

Xu Qi'an agreed.

Given Emperor Yuanjing's obsession with immortality and Daoist cultivation, there was no way he would be involved with a mere palace maid.

"Let's pay a visit to this Imperial Uncle. There's no point in guessing further," Xu Qi'an suggested.

Princess Huaqing agreed without hesitation, as though she had been thinking the same.

The two immediately left the ice cellar and spotted the little eunuch's distant figure. He hadn't left yet.

"This little eunuch is quite diligent..." Xu Qi'an approached him and said, "Princess Huaqing and I are leaving the palace for a while. You may rest now, and don't be too quick to report today's events to His Majesty."

The eunuch looked at him, hesitant to speak.

"If you have something to say, just say it. Don't beat around the bush."

"Sir Xu, your humble servant is a little afraid."

"Don't worry, I'll be gentle..." Xu Qi'an laughed heartily, "Rest assured, I won't involve you in matters you shouldn't know about. Just follow orders and you'll be fine."

Only then did the eunuch breathe a sigh of relief, "With your reassurance, your servant can rest easy."

Xu Qi'an had originally thought he would ride in the carriage with Huaqing, but to his surprise, the cold and indifferent princess had merely given him a fine steed.

Riding the horse and following the princess's carriage to the Imperial Uncle's residence, Xu Qi'an couldn't help but think of his beloved little mare.

After being ambushed yesterday, he had driven the mare away. After killing the three assassins, he had gone to the constabulary to tend to his injuries. Until now, he still didn't know the whereabouts of his mare.

However, before entering the palace this morning, he had instructed his colleagues to search for it.

The carriage window opened, and Huaqing poked her head out. Her features were flawless, with a delicate nose and vivid red lips, and the corners of her mouth were as refined as if carved. Her beautiful eyes were like a clear autumn lake, pure and transparent.

"Even if Mother did indeed take the blame for Imperial Uncle, the person behind the scenes is still yet to be found," she sighed.

Xu Qi'an didn't answer but instead asked, "What I don't understand is, why did the person behind the scenes wait until now to act against the Empress?"

Neither spoke further.

...

The Imperial Uncle's residence was located within the Imperial City. When Xu Qi'an and the eldest princess arrived, they asked the guards, only to learn that the Imperial Uncle was not in the Imperial City but at his old residence in the Inner City.

"Go ask when the Imperial Uncle moved to the old residence," Huaiqing ordered the accompanying guards from the open carriage window.

The guard asked around and reported, "This morning."

*This morning? Emperor Yuanjing had proposed deposing the Empress during this morning's court session... * Xu Qi'an instinctively glanced at Huaiqing, only to find that the princess was also looking at him.

"To the old Shangguan residence," Huaiqing commanded coldly.

The luxurious carriage made of golden silk and *zhennan* wood slowly exited the Imperial City, taking over an hour to reach the Shangguan family's ancestral home.

Surprisingly, the old residence of the Shangguan family was merely an ordinary three-layer courtyard house, not much grander than the mansion Xu Qi'an had purchased. Of course, in terms of refinement and luxury, it certainly outclassed the Xu estate.

Moreover, there were many guards stationed here.

As the carriage slowed to a stop, Xu Qi'an discreetly pulled out a piece of paper with the qi-watching technique he pre-prepared for the trip, and lit it with his qi.

Once the carriage halted outside the Shangguan residence, Huaiqing stepped down onto a small stool and walked directly into the residence. The guards at the door did not dare to stop her.

On the way, Huaiqing recounted the history of the Shangguan family. The Shangguan clan was not a particularly wealthy or powerful family. Huaiqing's maternal grandfather, Shangguan Qing, had risen to the position of Left Assistant Minister of the Ministry of Revenue and concurrently held the post of Grand Academician of the Eastern Pavilion.

However, this was only after Huaiqing's mother had entered the Fengqi Palace as the Empress.

Before that, the Shangguan family was a small clan, and her maternal grandfather, Shangguan Qing, had only held the position of Assistant Director of Revenue, a mere sixth rank.

"The Wei family and the Shangguan family were long-time friends. When Duke Wei was young and impoverished, he once studied in the Shangguan household. Grandfather could be considered half his teacher," Princess Huaiqing said.

Xu Qi'an nodded. It was only today that he learned of the connection between Wei Yuan and the Empress.

"Then Duke Wei..." He hesitated, but eventually asked the question weighing on his mind, "How did he enter the palace?"

Huaiqing shook her head.

As they passed through the front yard, the sound of string and woodwind instruments reached their ears.

In the distance, they saw that the rear hall doors were open, and seven or eight dancers dressed in sheer veils were gracefully performing, while musicians played seductive tunes.

Xu Qi'an widened his eyes. To be honest, he was accustomed to such scenes at the Jiaofangsi, but even the dancers in the Jiaofangsi didn't dress as boldly as these women.

These women wore neither undergarments nor loincloths, just a thin layer of gauze. Their movements exposed their intimate areas, flaunting their charms.

In the main hall, a middle-aged man with fair skin and fine features, sporting a small mustache, sat in the central seat, holding a beauty in each arm. He leered at the dancing women with lustful eyes.

To the sides sat several other revelers, all thoroughly enjoying themselves.

Xu Qi'an's understanding of the Imperial Uncle's debauchery deepened. His elder sister was about to be deposed, yet he still indulged in such pleasures. Even more absurdly, the Empress was taking the blame for him.

Disgusted and irritated, Xu thought to himself, *When will enablers like these finally be held accountable?*

Princess Huaqing stopped outside the hall, glanced sideways at Xu Qi'an.

Xu, understanding the gesture, removed his sword and approached the door, banging the hilt against the frame and shouting, "House inspection! Men to the left, women to the right! Hands on your heads, and have your ID cards ready!"

The revellers, immersed in their pleasure, were startled and only now noticed Xu Qi'an and Princess Huaqing standing at the entrance.

The dancers halted their movements, the musicians stopped playing, and the Imperial Uncle, with his moustache, froze for a moment before furrowing his brows.

Huaqing stepped over the threshold and into the hall, her voice as cold as a winter storm, "Everyone, leave this hall immediately. Anyone who comes within a hundred paces will be executed."

Xu Qi'an responded loudly, "Yes, Your Highness!"

With a flick of his thumb, his sword unsheathed half an inch, and he swept his gaze over the crowd, barking, "Get out!"

The musicians, dancers, and guests scattered in a panic.

"Don't go, don't go..." the Imperial Uncle shouted, but he couldn't stop the fleeing crowd. Stomping his foot in frustration, he pointed at Xu Qi'an and cursed, "Which burrow did you come out of, you running dog? Guards! Guards!"

Xu Qi'an frowned and thought, No wonder Huaqing despises this uncle so much. No wonder she suspected him immediately.

This is a 24K pure good-for-nothing.

After a few shouts and realising no one was coming to his aid, the Imperial Uncle stopped yelling. He squinted his eyes and turned to Huaqing, "Huaqing, what brings you from the palace to your uncle's place?"

"Are you aware that Father is planning to depose the Empress?" Huaiqing's voice was as cold as the harshest winter wind. "This morning, Father proposed deposing the Empress, yet here you are, drinking and making merry."

"Of course I know." the Imperial Uncle suddenly grew agitated. "But what can I do? I'm not Wei Yuan. Do you think just because I say the Empress shouldn't be deposed, His Majesty will listen?"

"Do you know why Father is deposing the Empress?" Huaiqing asked.

"Isn't it because my sister is scheming to make the Fourth Prince the crown prince by framing the Eastern Palace?" the Imperial Uncle scoffed disdainfully.

Xu Qi'an cautiously glanced at Huaiqing. Throughout, she remained calm, or rather, indifferent.

Just as he was about to press the Imperial Uncle about Huang Xiaorou, he noticed Huaiqing gesture with her hand. The Princess coldly smiled, "Uncle, by royal decree, we are here to arrest you."

the Imperial Uncle was stunned. "Arrest me? On what grounds?"

Huaiqing finally revealed a chilling smile. "On the grounds of the palace maid Huang Xiaorou."

At these words, the Imperial Uncle was struck as if by lightning. His entire body trembled, and fear flickered in his eyes. He forced himself to hold on, stammering, "Huang Xiaorou? What are you talking about, Huaiqing? What nonsense are you spouting?!"

His stammer turned into an angry roar.

"Not until the coffin is in sight will one shed tears," Huaiqing remarked as she extended her hand, and Xu Qi'an passed the dull yellow silk cloth to her.

She grabbed it and flung it forcefully at the Imperial Uncle's face. "In the spring of the 31st year of Yuanjing, you know full well what you did to Huang Xiaorou."

The Imperial Uncle froze.

The yellow silk slipped off his face, as if stripping away the last trace of colour. His pupils dilated, and fear clouded his expression.

"Who told you? Who told you about Huang Xiaorou?" the Imperial Uncle muttered.

"Naturally, it was Her Majesty the Empress," Xu Qi'an chimed in, playing along.

"Nonsense!"

the Imperial Uncle's reaction was surprisingly intense. Blood rushed back to his face, though it was unclear whether it was from agitation or rage. He shouted:

"I am the only son of the Shangguan family! How could she betray me? How dare she? How would she face our father in the afterlife? Don't try to deceive me."

Xu Qi'an replied, "Because Huang Xiaorou was implicated in the Consort Fu case, her past was exposed, and the Empress had no choice but to confess. In the spring of the 31st year of Yuanjing, you violated Huang Xiaorou in the palace."

He spoke with certainty.

"Impossible! Huang Xiaorou has long been dead. My sister promised me she would silence her," the Imperial Uncle said in shock.

The truth was, the Empress did not kill her. She merely forced Huang Xiaorou to abort the child... Huaiqing was right; the Empress was far too soft-hearted... Xu Qi'an glanced at the Princess.

Huaiqing remained expressionless, her demeanor as cold as ever. "Confess truthfully to us. It would be far better than doing so in the Nightwatcher dungeon. Or does Imperial Uncle wish to experience the punishments the Nightwatchers deal in?"

The Imperial Uncle slumped into his seat, defeated.

"Yes, Huang Xiaorou and I had an affair, but she was willing. She thought I was the Emperor.

"I have always enjoyed the company of beautiful women, but I grew tired of the women from the brothels and the Jiaofangsi. The concubines in my household no longer excited me. Gradually, I realised that the women in the palace were far more alluring than those outside.

"It's all my sister's fault. Her Fengqi Palace has so many palace maids, yet she wouldn't even let me touch one. The Emperor has been obsessed with Daoism for years and has long ceased visiting the harem. So what's wrong with me taking a few maids?

"She is the mistress of the harem. As long as she agrees, who can stop me? I'm not asking for the Emperor's concubines. That day, when I visited Fengqi Palace to see the Empress, I saw a palace maid cleaning. She was delicate and lovely, utterly captivating. I thought she was a new maid in the palace, so I made advances.

"She mistook me for the Emperor, blushing with embarrassment, but didn't dare refuse, allowing me to have my way."

Huang Xiaorou entered the palace in the 28th year of Yuanjing, and by then, the Emperor had already turned to Daoism and no longer visited the harem... A mere palace maid would have had no idea what the Emperor looked like... Xu Qi'an mused, the effects of his Qi-gazing watching still active, confirming that the Imperial Uncle wasn't lying.

"When I saw that no one was around, I took her to a side chamber and shared a night of pleasure. Afterward, she was filled with joy, thinking she had served the Emperor, convinced that she was the one who had made him break his celibacy. Not just her—every woman in the harem, from concubines to maids, fantasises about being special enough to be favored by the Emperor."

Impersonating the Emperor to seduce palace maids... No wonder the Empress was so desperate to protect you. Even ten lives wouldn't be enough to atone for this...

the Imperial Uncle swallowed nervously. "Later, I became addicted to the experience, often using visits to the Empress as an excuse to rendezvous with Huang Xiaorou. The feeling she gave me was unlike any other woman. But I never expected her to get pregnant..."

"At that point, I panicked and told the Empress. She scolded me harshly, forbidding me from entering the palace again. She promised to silence Huang Xiaorou and clean up the mess."

Xu Qi'an said distantly, "So, Huang Xiaorou believed she was carrying the Emperor's child. When the Empress forced her to abort, she hated the Empress to the core. But when she later discovered that the man who had deceived her wasn't the Emperor but you, the Imperial Uncle... The child was already gone, and the truth was out. Powerless to defy the Empress, she took her own life in shame and anger."

"But the Empress was too soft-hearted. She felt guilty for your actions and retrieved a miraculous elixir from the Imperial Pharmacy to save Huang Xiaorou's life. Yet, no one could have predicted that four years later, this buried secret would come back to haunt her."

"It's all her fault! If she had killed Huang Xiaorou back then, none of this would be happening now!" the Imperial Uncle cried out in rage. "It's her fault! She ruined me!"

"You lie!" Xu Qi'an suddenly interrupted, his voice sharp. "If it were just Huang Xiaorou, the Empress wouldn't need to take the fall. Huang Xiaorou is dead, and the dead tell no tales. The Empress could easily deny it."

"Since she confessed, it means that besides Huang Xiaorou, there's another piece of evidence in someone else's hands."

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Chapter 253. Take a Door to the Face

"When I wanted to show my 'status' back then, I secretly took a piece of fabric from the Empress's palace..." As the Imperial Uncle spoke, his eyes shifted to the yellow silk cloth.

Xu Qi'an understood. So, the yellow silk that Huang Xiaorou had was obtained this way.

However, many concubines in the palace likely had access to such material. Relying on just this piece of fabric wouldn't be strong enough evidence... Just as Xu Qi'an was pondering this, he suddenly heard Huaiqing's calm voice:

"Sir Xu was able to trace the clues from the autopsy to lock onto the Imperial Uncle. How much more likely is it that the mastermind, who already knew the inside story, would be able to do so?"

"If my mother hadn't confessed, evidence would naturally emerge to help Sir Xu trace it back to the Imperial Uncle. Besides, with our Uncle's 'unbreakable resolve,' he'd surely confess everything after just one night in the Nightwatcher prison."

A cold smirk played on the corners of Huaiqing's mouth.

She has a point. I was trapped in a fixed mindset. This bastard must have a lot of dirt on him. The key issue isn't how much dirt he has but rather the Empress's decision...

Although he's a useless fool, he's still the only brother. If Erlang were constantly bullying and harassing women, would I save him if political enemies used him to attack me?

In Xu Qi'an's mind, he imagined Xu Xinnian receiving a group of bodyguards, surrounding several young beauties, grinning lewdly as they were lead to him....

What a beautiful scene... It's giving me goosebumps. Well, with Erlang's looks, he wouldn't need to use force. There would be plenty of respectable women eager for him... Xu Qi'an muttered internally.

"I want to see the Empress, I must see the Empress..." the Imperial Uncle, excited, lunged toward Huaiqing like a child who had made a mistake but hoped for someone to shield him.

"The Emperor can depose her if he wants, she doesn't care about him anyway. The Empress's position means nothing to her. But Huaiqing, I'm your only uncle."

"Silence!"

Huaiqing, rarely angry, rebuked sharply, her tone fierce: "Father and Mother's love is not something you can slander!"

Damn, what a talent! It's not that he's overly bold, but rather his sheer stupidity. He never thinks things through, always assuming someone will clean up his mess... Just like those reckless youths who believe they're invincible.

*In my time, he'd be labelled a man-child, someone who has never faced the harsh realities of life...
* Xu Qi'an clicked his tongue twice in thought.

The crucial thing is, while deceiving the Emperor and seducing palace maids is a thrill, this Duke is the only one daring enough to actually do it.

No matter whether the Empress is deposed or the Imperial Uncle faces punishment, it's a family matter for the Emperor. It doesn't really concern him.

So he can be very relaxed. At most, he'll feel sorry for Huaiqing somewhat, but given Huaiqing's loathing for her uncle, even if his head was chopped off I doubt wifey would be very upset about it.

Suddenly, a light bulb went off in Xu Qi'an's head. The Empress may not be able to truly punish her brother, but how could Duke Wei tolerate such an incompetent ally?

Even if the two families were old friends, with Duke Wei's skill, keeping a scumbag in line and making him behave should be easy.

"Does Duke Wei know about this?" Xu Qi'an asked.

At this, Huaiqing immediately glanced at him, a thoughtful look crossing her face.

"Wei Yuan?"

Just moments ago, the Imperial Uncle had been panicking and helpless, but now his expression turned vicious and angry. He sneered, "Yes, it must be Wei Yuan behind all of this. It has to be him."

"He killed my father, and now he's after me. That heartless bastard deserves to die without an heir."

Xu Qi'an's small mind suddenly filled with big questions. Before entering the estate, Huaiqing had told him that the Wei family and the Shangguan family were old friends.

But judging from the Imperial Uncle's attitude, they seemed more like mortal enemies than family friends.

Xu Qi'an immediately turned to Huaiking. She furrowed her brow, clearly just as perplexed by the Imperial Uncle's words and unsure of the underlying truth.

Clearing his throat, Xu Qi'an took the initiative to ask, "What do you mean? Why would Wei Yuan want to harm you?"

the Imperial Uncle shot him a glance and chuckled coldly, "Do you dare to listen? Do you know what Wei Yuan did all those years ago..."

"Slap!"

Before the Imperial Uncle could finish, Xu Qi'an slapped him, cutting him off.

"Enough, I don't want to hear it. Right now, I only want to take you back to the Nightwatcher constabulary," Xu Qi'an said as he glanced at Huaiking, seeking her approval.

Princess Huaiking nodded and said, "Take him away."

"Huaiking, Huaiking, you can't treat me like this... I'm the only son of the Shangguan family. Your mother wouldn't allow you to do this..."

Xu Qi'an dragged the Imperial Uncle out of the estate. Following Huaiking's orders, the Imperial Uncle was handed over to a few guards, who escorted him to the Nightwatcher constabulary.

As Xu Qi'an mounted his horse, Huaiking opened the window of her carriage and called out in her cold voice, "Sir Xu, why not ride with us?"

Oh no, this isn't appropriate. A man and woman, alone together, sharing a carriage? I've never even ridden with my younger sister or my aunt... Xu Qi'an quickly dismounted and climbed into the luxurious gold thread and zhennan wood carriage.

With a crack of the whip, the coachman urged the two horses forward, and they galloped swiftly and steadily away from the Shangguan estate, heading toward the imperial city.

Inside the carriage, soft woollen carpets covered the floor. At the far end was a couch, draped with azure *kui*-patterned cushions, two large chairs, and a fixed tea table.

The eldest princess retrieved some tea leaves from a wooden cabinet beneath the table, lit some smokeless "beastmetal" charcoal, and began brewing tea. "Does Sir Xu have any suggestions?" she asked.

This is like the ancient version of a limousine... This carriage alone must be worth thousands of taels of silver... Xu Qi'an mused inwardly, then responded thoughtfully, "Your Highness surely has an idea already."

Huaiking nodded slowly. "I have never liked Imperial Uncle. Since this matter started with him, it should end with him."

The unspoken message was clear: she was prepared to hand over the Imperial Uncle.

"But even so, the Empress is still guilty of shielding him." Xu Qi'an frowned.

This matter could be either serious or trivial. If Emperor Yuanjing were magnanimous and forgiving, a small punishment would suffice, and there would be no need to depose the Empress. On the other hand, Yuanjing could use this as a pretext to depose her, as the crime was sufficient.

From what Xu Qi'an knew of Emperor Yuanjing, he was possessive and power-hungry. People like him were deep thinkers but couldn't tolerate any blemish.

"Who said my mother shielded him? It was the Imperial Uncle who, after learning about Consort Fu's case, realised his misdeeds were about to be exposed. He then sent people to desperately plead with my mother. Out of familial ties, though she despised Uncle's disgraceful behaviour that brought chaos to the inner palace, she still chose to take the blame for him."

Princess Huaiking's expression and tone were as calm as ever, her face practically reading, "Yes, that's exactly what happened."

Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly. "Your highness has a point."

Damn, if I married a woman like this, it would be nearly impossible to cheat or be unfaithful.

"We are quite curious about what the Imperial Uncle was going to say before Sir Xu interrupted him. Why did you stop him?" The Princess asked casually.

Xu Qi'an calmly examined Huaiking's exquisitely carved features. "What was the Imperial Uncle about to say? I have no idea, Your Highness. If you're curious, I could interrogate him for you later."

He had intentionally interrupted the Duke earlier because the matter involved Wei Yuan.

For Xu Qi'an, there were two things he should avoid. The first was palace secrets, which needed no further explanation. The second was anything related to Wei Yuan's secrets. As Wei Yuan was his superior and his biggest backer, if Xu wanted to keep his footing in the capital, he had to maintain a good relationship with him.

Thus, any secrets regarding Wei Yuan were things Xu Qi'an shouldn't know about—unless Wei Yuan told him personally.

Huaiking smiled lightly and shifted the topic. "Sir Xu need not worry about the Empress. Duke Wei will handle it. What you need to do is find the mastermind behind all this. Do you have any thoughts?"

Xu Qi'an furrowed his brow, staring at the purple clay teapot being licked by the blue-red flames, silent for a long time.

...

Nightwatcher Constabulary, the Tower of Noble Spirit.

A black-clad official entered the tea room and respectfully said, "Duke Wei, Princess Huaiking's guards have brought the Imperial Uncle to the constabulary. The Imperial Uncle is clamouring to see you."

Without looking up from the memorial he was reading, Wei Yuan responded indifferently, "There's no need to meet a dead man. Notify Gold Gong Nangong and have him take good care of the Imperial Uncle."

After the official withdrew, Wei Yuan closed the memorial and slowly paced to the observation deck, his deep and weathered gaze fixed on the distant imperial palace.

...

Back at the imperial palace, Princess Huaiking headed straight for Fengqi Palace.

Xu Qi'an, intending to continue investigating the names on the list, called for a young eunuch to assist him.

Following the list, tracking the clues one by one, he hit a snag when he reached the last person.

It was a palace maid from Jingxiu Palace.

"Sister Lang'er is currently attending to the Noble Consort. Sir Xu should return later," the gatekeeping eunuch blocked Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the sky and spoke kindly, "When would be a good time for me to come back, then?"

The eunuch responded coldly, "Who knows, maybe tomorrow."

"The case is urgent, and I can't afford such delays. I just need to ask a few quick questions. It'll only take a moment."

Xu Qi'an pulled out a banknote for five taels of silver and handed it over. The eunuch took the money, turned around, went inside—and never came back.

"How dare he!" The young eunuch accompanying Xu Qi'an was outraged and angrily said, "Sir Xu, that running dog is toying with you."

"If I forced my way in, what would happen?" Xu Qi'an asked, expressionless.

"Oh no, you mustn't!" The young eunuch quickly stopped him, urging, "Breaking into a consort's chambers is a serious crime."

Xu Qi'an nodded, then turned to leave.

The young eunuch hurried after him and said, "Might as well give up. It's getting late. Sir, you should head back."

"No, I'm going to see Her Majesty Princess Lin'an for reimbursement."

Chapter 254. She Wasn't Lying

Shaoyin Palace.

Lin'an was in a good mood. Today, Emperor Yuanjing had raised the issue of deposing the Empress in court, and within half a day, the news had spread throughout the entire government of the Great Feng.

Naturally, Lin'an, being in the palace, had heard about it as well.

The second princess, dressed in a splendid red dress, hummed a little tune as she sat on a swing under a grapevine trellis, her small, delicate embroidered shoes swinging joyfully beneath her skirt.

Her happiness was justified. The Empress had admitted to framing the Crown Prince and murdering Consort Fu. Soon, her dear brother, the Crown Prince, would be released from the High Court, and her mother would no longer be weeping every day.

And also, the running dog had returned alive. In just half a month, everything had turned around in her favour.

Lin'an felt a sense of tranquility, as if time itself had slowed to a peaceful halt.

Huaiqing must be feeling very sad right now. Hmph, serves her right for her mother's framing of my brother, the Crown Prince... Hmm, since we are in a good mood, we won't go rub it in for a few days.

Her mischievous heart was eager to act, but knowing that Huaiqing's fists were larger than hers, Lin'an decided to follow her heart's desire and wait a bit before provoking her sister.

When the time comes, she'll bring the running dog with her—after all, he's a hero who fought against thousands of enemy troops, so he should be able to protect her.

A guard walked over from outside the courtyard, stopping several meters away before bowing with clasped fists. "Your Highness, Sir Xu has arrived."

Lin'an's face instantly lit up with a bright smile. "Quick, invite him in."

She remained seated on the swing but turned her head expectantly, eagerly waiting.

Xu Qi'an entered, followed by the little eunuch. He casually sat at the stone table beneath the grapevine trellis, helping himself to the fruits prepared for Lin'an, the pastries made by the imperial kitchen, and the tea specially supplied to the palace.

"Hey..." The palace maid standing nearby called out softly.

"Hmm?" Xu Qi'an looked at her, confused.

"That's Her Highness's tea," the maid whispered, her voice as soft as a mosquito's buzz.

"Oh, my deepest apologies." Xu Qi'an said as he took another sip from the cup.

At this, Lin'an could no longer hold it in. Her face flushed pink as she huffed, "Xu Ningyan!"

Just then, a gust of wind stirred the grapevine, causing the sunlight to dapple through the leaves, falling on her round, fair face. Her lips were rosy, her nose delicate, and her charming, flirtatious peach-blossom eyes hinted at words unspoken. With the blush on her cheeks, she exuded an indescribably alluring charm.

A naturally seductive woman.

Huaiqing and Lin'an were both exceptional beauties... It's a pity the other two princesses, though quite pretty, fell far short of being "peerless beauties"... Xu Qi'an thought with regret.

Otherwise, he would have done everything possible to gather all of Great Feng's princesses under his wing.

Sir Xu is favoured by both the eldest princess and the second princess, his future prospects were limitless... the little eunuch thought to himself.

In this vast capital, aside from the royal princes and princesses, there was likely no one else who could interact with Princess Lin'an like this—except Sir Xu.

In recent days, the little eunuch had followed Xu Qi'an during his investigation, witnessing first-hand his interactions with Princess Huaiqing and Princess Lin'an. Even a blind man could see how much both princesses valued and appreciated Xu Qi'an.

"The case isn't solved yet?" Lin'an asked in her crisp voice. "Running dog, why are you still investigating inside the palace?"

She had deduced that Xu Qi'an was still working on the case, judging by the presence of the little eunuch. Otherwise, he would have come to Shaoyin Courtyard alone.

"The case is far from over..." Xu Qi'an sighed deeply, putting on a sorrowful expression. "Your Highness, am I not one of your people?"

"Of course!" Lin'an nodded without hesitation.

"I've been bullied," Xu Qi'an said, covering his face as if overcome with grief. "My family is really struggling. Since I was young, my second uncle always told me that children from poor families must grow up early..."

"But that damned dog from Jingxiu Palace extorted ten taels of silver from me."

Though Lin'an had a playful and sassy nature, she was still loyal and righteous. Upon hearing this, she immediately became furious and sprang up from the swing, her delicate eyebrows raised high.

"Let's go to Jingxiu Palace! We will demand justice for you."

The silver was a minor issue, but bullying her people was a big problem.

Xu Qi'an "obediently" followed beside the princess, wearing a wronged expression. After a while, he casually asked, "Your Highness, is there a palace maid named Lang'er serving by Noble Consort Chen's side?"

"Yes," Lin'an nodded.

"Has this maid been serving in Jingxiu Palace for a long time?"

"Indeed. She's been serving Mother Consort ever since she entered the palace."

"Could Your Highness tell me more about her? Perhaps what she likes or dislikes, or anything noteworthy she's been involved in recently?"

"Why would we care about a mere palace maid's recent activities?" Lin'an responded righteously. After thinking for a moment, she added, "But she does love green bean cakes. I often see Mother Consort giving her leftover green bean cakes, which she eats with great delight."

As they spoke, they arrived at Jingxiu Palace.

In the distance, they spotted the gatekeeping eunuch who had just extorted ten taels from Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an strode forward and slapped him across the face. Pointing at the eunuch who was now clutching his face, Xu said, "Your Highness, this is the one who extorted me."

"You..." The gatekeeping eunuch covered his burning cheek, both angry and shocked. He hadn't expected Xu Qi'an to return with the second princess to cause trouble. After all, he was a servant in Consort Chen's palace. Even an insignificant gatekeeper serving a consort carried some weight. Typically, external officials wouldn't dare confront palace eunuchs so boldly. If they suffered a loss, they would usually swallow their pride.

"Slap him again."

Maintaining the poise of a princess in front of others, Lin'an coldly commanded.

Xu Qi'an delivered another slap, sending the gatekeeper stumbling, his ears ringing.

"Dare to extort one of Our people? We'll spare you this time out of respect for Mother Consort. If you ever dare show disrespect to Sir Xu again, you'll be demoted and made to do hard labour."

Lin'an's delicate face was covered in a frosty expression as she ordered, "Hand over the silver."

She's willing to give the gatekeeper a chance, Lin'an is really a rather kind-hearted person, much more innocent than most of the royal family... Xu Qi'an thought to himself. It was precisely because of this nature that she was susceptible to being taken advantage of by scoundrels.

Lin'an and I have a good relationship; I must keep a close eye on her to prevent her from being harmed by such people.

Though the gatekeeper was unwilling, five taels of silver were worth more than a month's wages. Yet, he dared not disobey the second princess, so he could only take out the warm silver banknote and present it with both hands. "This servant was blind. Please, Sir Xu, don't hold it against me."

Xu Qi'an didn't take it. "I gave you ten taels."

Ten!?!

The gatekeeper lifted his head, at a loss for words. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, before trying to retort: "It was clearly five taels, how could Sir Xu wrong this servant?"

Xu Qi'an immediately turned to Biaobiao and said loudly, "Your Highness, look at this duplicitous running dog, completely disregarding your authority."

Lin'an glared at him with her charming peach blossom eyes that couldn't muster any true fierceness.

"This servant wouldn't dare, wouldn't dare..."

The gate eunuch fumbled around for a while before producing three taels of silver and some loose change, his face full of grief. "This servant only has this much left."

Xu Qi'an cheerfully pocketed the silver. "Doing good deeds doesn't always bring rewards, but not doing them will surely lead to reckoning one day."

"Consider this silver as a tuition fee for today's lesson."

Some people always think that simply apologising is enough when they do wrong, and if others continue to press the matter, it's their fault for being unreasonable. If apologies were enough, what need would there be for the law? You cheated me out of five taels, and now you think returning it is enough? Wishful thinking.

He then turned to gaze at the graceful profile of Biaobiao and said, "Since we're already here, Your Highness might as well take me into Jingxiu Palace. I need to wrap up the case concerning Lady Fu."

Biaobiao then led him across the courtyard gate into the inner grounds.

"Your Highness, I need to speak with a palace maid named Lang'er. Could you summon her for me?"

Xu Qi'an followed a palace maid into a side hall while Biaobiao went to visit her mother, the concubine. As he watched the back of her crimson dress disappearing, he called that out to her, and without turning her head, she responded playfully, "Got it."

In the side hall, a young palace maid stood nearby.

"Where's the outhouse?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Please wait a moment, Sir." The palace maid replied softly, then went out and returned with a little eunuch, who guided Xu Qi'an to the outhouse on the southern side of the courtyard. After closing the door, Xu Qi'an pulled out the Confucian version of the "magic book" from his ground book fragment and tore off the page recording the Qi-watching technique, igniting it with his qi.

Two beams of clear qi shot out from his pupils, then quickly faded.

The magic book is getting thinner the more I use it. This won't do. It's so useful that I must keep using it. After the spring exams, I'll visit Cloud Deer Academy and meet my three teachers... I should prepare some verses to 'borrow' from them in advance...

Returning to the side hall, he sipped tea as he awaited Lang'er, the palace maid.

...

Inside the main house of the inner courtyard, Concubine Chen lounged lazily on a soft couch, with two close palace maids attending to her. One massaged her shoulders while the other kneaded her legs.

There were no Imperial-Noble Consorts in Emperor Yuanjing's harem, which made Concubine Chen second only to the Empress, reigning supreme over all other concubines. Moreover, before long, her position in the harem would truly be unrivalled.

Holding a scroll, Concubine Chen smiled and said, "This _Spring Courtyard Moon_ is so well written. We find ourselves liking it more and more."

Lang'er covered her mouth and giggled. "It's because you're in a good mood, madam, that the book seems better."

The other maid chimed in with a laugh, "Yes, though the Crown Prince hasn't been released from the High Court yet, it's only a matter of time. You've been weeping day and night recently, and it's been breaking our hearts."

Lang'er whispered, "Who would have thought the Empress, of all people, would be so ruthless? To harm Madam Fu and frame the Crown Prince... We all thought she was truly kind and benevolent."

Concubine Chen frowned and reprimanded, "Do not speak ill of the Empress."

"You're too cautious, madam. His Majesty has already proposed deposing the Empress in court. Once the officials approve it, she will no longer be Empress," the other palace maid giggled.

"Maybe our lady will soon become the Empress herself."

Concubine Chen furrowed her brow again, about to scold the two loose-tongued maids, when the sound of light footsteps echoed.

"Mother, Lin'an is here."

The shadow of Lin'an's figure flickered across the door, her fiery red dress like a flame swaying in the wind.

The two senior maids immediately fell silent, ending the conversation.

Concubine Chen's expression softened into a loving smile as she straightened her slender waist and beckoned, "Lin'an, didn't you just visit this morning?"

"I missed you, Mother. I could stay in Jingxiu Palace all day if it meant I could keep you company."

Lin'an was a girl who knew how to act coquettishly. With her beauty and sweet words, both Emperor Yuanjing and Concubine Chen were very fond of her.

"Then keep me company for a while. When you feel bored, you can go back to Shaoyin Pavilion," Concubine Chen said, pulling her daughter to sit by her side.

"Alright!"

After sitting down, Lin'an chirped, "I mainly came to see you, Mother, but also to handle some business."

Concubine Chen's smile remained as she asked softly, "What business?"

Lin'an glanced at Lang'er and instructed, "Sir Xu has something to ask you. He's waiting for you in the side hall. Go see him."

Then she explained to her mother, "It's the Nightwatcher I trained, Xu Qi'an. Mother should remember him. He's handling the case of my brother, the Crown Prince. He seems to have some questions for Lang'er, but the gatekeeper wouldn't let him in."

Concubine Chen pondered for a moment and waved her hand, "Lang'er, go meet with him."

"Yes ma'am," Lang'er replied, placing her hands neatly in front of her waist. She stepped gracefully over the threshold, leaving the courtyard.

Lin'an withdrew her gaze and continued, "Mother, we must thank Xu Qi'an for helping clear my brother's name. You have no idea how hard I've worked to train him."

"You always say Huaiqing is good at nurturing talent and building her own network, but I'm not bad either. When I first met him, he was just a small bailiff in Chang'le County. Now, after all my efforts, he's become quite exceptional."

Concubine Chen, slightly surprised, asked, "How did you meet a small bailiff?"

"Ah, don't worry about the details. The point is, the talent I cultivated saved my brother, right?"

"Right, right. All thanks to Lin'an. If it weren't for the person you groomed, your brother would have been in grave danger," Concubine Chen laughed, playfully pinching her daughter's soft, rounded cheeks.

...

In the side hall, Xu Qi'an sat in a chair, holding a teacup, gently blowing on it.

Even the tea served to guests here in Jingxiu Palace was far more fragrant than the finest tea his aunt treasured.

But it still can't compare to the tea Lin'an drank earlier. I'll ask her for a few taels of tea leaves later, so my second uncle and aunt can also try some of these tributes.

With that in mind, Xu Qi'an happily took a sip, then glanced at the little eunuch standing nearby and smiled.

"Little Eunuch, you're here by His Majesty's command to monitor me. In official terms, that makes you a royal inspector. Sit down, don't just stand there."

The little eunuch had some sense and helplessly replied, "Only when outside the capital am I a royal inspector. Here in the palace, I'm still just a servant. It's like those provincial governors—impressive outside, but back in the capital, they're just minor censors."

This remark amused Xu Qi'an. "Penetrating insight, truly."

If Governor Zhang returned to the capital, he'd be just another lackey, but out in the provinces, even high-ranking officials like the Provincial Administrator and Military Commander would treat him with utmost respect and call themselves "subordinates."

"By the way, Little Eunuch, you serve in His Majesty's chambers, right?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The little eunuch nodded.

"After you reported yesterday, did His Majesty go to the Empress's Fengqi Palace?"

Xu Qi'an had been harboring a question for a while. Yesterday, after finding the connection between Huang Xiaorou and the Empress in Xie Pavilion, the clues began pointing to the Empress. However, the records in the imperial pharmacy had been torn, so there was no solid proof that the Empress had saved Huang Xiaorou.

Given Emperor Yuanjing's intelligence and composure, he wouldn't rush to confront the Empress before the case was clear.

If Yuanjing were truly that impulsive, he would have already deposed the Crown Prince when the case first broke.

"No..." The little eunuch shook his head, hesitated for a moment, and then whispered, "It was the Noble Consort Chen who went to His Majesty's chambers in tears, accusing the Empress of framing the Crown Prince. Out of affection for the Noble Consort, His Majesty then went to Fengqi Palace to question the Empress. It was then that I was summoned for questioning, before I even made my report."

How did Noble Consort Chen know about the progress of the case?

No need to ask—it was definitely Lin'an who told her. The little brat couldn't help but share the joyful news with her mother once the case had made a breakthrough and the Crown Prince's vindication was in sight.

As they were chatting, a woman in a pale green palace gown stepped across the threshold into the side hall.

She had delicate features and fair skin, around twenty-four or twenty-five years old. Her eyes were round like apricots, similar to Chu Caiwei's, though not quite as large.

Chu Caiwei's big eyes always reminded Xu Qi'an of those two-dimensional anime waifus.

Combined with her round, soft face, she had an irresistibly cute appearance, worthy of the title of "big-eyed cutie."

The palace maid entered the side hall, performed a graceful salute, and said, "Greetings, Sir Xu."

"Sister Lang'er," Xu Qi'an smiled and returned the greeting.

Lang'er stood in the hall, nodding slightly. "What does Sir Xu wish to ask? The Madam is still waiting for me to attend to her."

Xu Qi'an immediately responded, "Apologies, but I'm just performing my duties."

Without further ado, he got straight to the point. "Sister Lang'er, did you go to the imperial pharmacy a few days ago?"

Lang'er nodded.

"What for?"

"Since the Crown Prince's incident, Her Highness has been crying daily and feeling unwell. That day, she had a headache, so I went to the pharmacy to get some soothing medicine," Lang'er replied frankly.

"Did you tear the pharmacy's financial records?" Xu Qi'an asked directly.

He had asked the other eunuchs and maids on the list in the same straightforward manner. With the Qi-watching technique, it was like having a flawless lie detector, even more reliable than surveillance.

Though the technique had many limitations—it could be blocked by magical artefacts, was ineffective against arcanists, and couldn't be used to accuse officials above the fourth rank or in cases involving national affairs like this one—it was still an invaluable tool for questioning eunuchs and maids, as no such restrictions applied.

It was like being able to first identify the "wolf" and then investigate from there, much easier than following clues step by step.

Lang'er was momentarily stunned, seemingly surprised by how blunt Xu Qi'an was. She shook her head. "No."

She's telling the truth... Watching her aura, Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly.

It seemed he was wrong. The person who tore the records hadn't entered the pharmacy in the past five days but rather much earlier. As for sneaking into the pharmacy, that was unlikely.

The imperial pharmacy stored rare elixirs and pills, treasures that the Dog Emperor used his private funds to concoct. Calling the pharmacy a treasure trove wasn't an exaggeration.

Since it was such a treasure trove, it was naturally heavily guarded. It wasn't a place one could simply sneak into.

"There are two possibilities: either the culprit entered the pharmacy more than five days ago, or there's a traitor within the pharmacy. I'll have to question the maids and eunuchs working there soon..."

With that thought, Xu Qi'an stood up, clasped his hands, and said, "I've finished asking. But since the case isn't over yet, I may have to visit again."

He was preemptively smoothing things over to avoid being turned away later.

Lang'er's expression showed clear impatience upon hearing this.

Xu Qi'an quickly added, "I'll send Sister Lang'er a small gift later. The green bean cakes from Guiyuelou in the capital are their specialty."

He knew Lang'er liked green bean cakes. Lin'an had mentioned it on their way to Jingxiu Palace.

"No need," Lang'er shook her head, her tone distant and slightly resistant. "Your servant doesn't like green bean cakes."

Am I being disliked...? Hmph, this woman is at the age where she's practically like a wolf, yet she treats a rare beauty like me with such hostility.

Is it because the Pill of Rebirth's effects aren't potent enough, or is it that her flower garden has never had a guest, so she can't appreciate a real man's value?

"Since that's the case, this official won't bother you..."

Suddenly, Xu Qi'an froze.

In his Qi-watching view, Lang'er's emotions were calm—she wasn't lying.

She wasn't lying?!

Chapter 255. Frank Admissions

At that moment, Xu Qi'an couldn't conceal the shock and surprise on his face.

What the Qi-watching technique showed him made him instantly alert, and countless thoughts collided in his mind, sparking all kinds of realisations.

Two possibilities came to mind quickly: First, Lang'er might genuinely not like green bean cakes, and her previous display of liking them was merely to curry favour with Consort Chen.

Second, she was lying, and the Qi-watching technique hadn't detected it, which meant she was wearing an artefact that could shield against it.

The first possibility couldn't be confirmed right away.

The second possibility, however, sent chills down Xu Qi'an's spine and made his adrenaline surge.

How could a palace maid from Jingxiu Palace possess an artefact that could block the Qi-watching technique?

Why would she wear such an artefact?

Unless she needed it to cover her tracks for something she had done recently. Unless she knew she would be questioned.

What had she done recently?

She had been to the imperial pharmacy!

As for the possibility that the person standing in front of him wasn't Lang'er, but rather an imposter in disguise... Xu Qi'an considered it unlikely. A human skin mask wouldn't have escaped his scrutiny.

If it were a high-level expert using advanced transformation techniques, it would be even more impossible. This was the imperial palace—no high-level expert could sneak in here undetected.

"Sir Xu?"

Lang'er frowned, narrowing her eyes as she scrutinized Xu Qi'an, who had lost control of his expression.

I can't jump to conclusions. Maybe she really just doesn't like green bean cakes and unintentionally spoke the truth, Xu Qi'an thought, trying to maintain composure. Instead of calming his emotions, he allowed his face to show some frustration. He glared at Lang'er and said in a somewhat indignant tone:

"Lang'er, even though you serve by Consort Chen's side, your attitude is rather disrespectful. I've shed blood for the court and earned merit through my accomplishments, and yet you treat me with such disdain. Do you have something against me?"

Lang'er glanced at him, then responded coolly, "Sir Xu, you're overthinking. I have no ill feelings towards you."

After a pause, she curtsied slightly. "I must return to serve the consort."

With that, she stepped out of the threshold and left.

Watching her retreating figure, Xu Qi'an's heart sank to the bottom.

Just now, the Qi-watching technique still showed that Lang'er hadn't lied.

His last question had been both an attempt to cover his own lapse and a trap, hoping Lang'er would slip up.

Xu Qi'an could confirm that Lang'er was impatient with the questioning and had little regard for him. She clearly wanted to get rid of him as soon as possible.

Under normal circumstances, when faced with a question like "Do you hate me?" most people would, out of politeness, deny it, which would constitute a lie.

But according to the Qi-watching feedback, Lang'er's emotions remained calm, and no lie was detected.

This almost certainly confirmed that Lang'er was carrying an artefact that blocked the Qi-watching technique, which indirectly validated her guilt and intent to evade interrogation.

At this point, a terrifying truth began to unfold in Xu Qi'an's mind.

She was the mastermind!

Consort Chen?!

In an instant, countless details and clues floated to the surface of Xu Qi'an's thoughts, information rushing like boiling water.

I didn't see this coming... I need to leave here quickly and report my findings to Duke Wei and Princess Huaqing... Xu Qi'an didn't want to stay in Jingxiu Palace a moment longer.

The feeling was akin to entering a desolate mountain inn in the dead of night, only to discover it was a haunted house. The innkeeper was a terrifying ghoul, with rotting flesh and maggots crawling all over. The food on the table was nothing but worms, faeces, rotten meat, and human heads.

Xu Qi'an was the hapless person who had accidentally uncovered the secrets of this ghost house, and now, all he wanted was to act as if nothing had happened and escape before the ghoul realized he had found out.

"I'm done here. Little Eunuch. Let's head back."

Xu Qi'an took a deep breath, masking his unease with calmness as he suggested they leave.

"Yes, sir!" The little eunuch, unaware of anything amiss, replied lightly and followed Xu Qi'an as they crossed the threshold.

Wait!

Xu Qi'an's body suddenly stiffened. If Consort Chen was behind this, then the empress was destined to pay the price—stripped of her title and banished to the Cold Palace.

Whether or not the crown prince would be deposed was uncertain. Xu Qi'an didn't care about the crown prince. What he cared about was: What would happen to Lin'an?

She had been so happy today because the case was on the verge of being solved, and the crown prince would soon be exonerated.

But what would happen next? I might personally send her mother into a bottomless abyss.

She's bound to hate me once she finds out.

Compared to Huaiqing, Lin'an was the type of girl who couldn't handle such devastating news. Her mother could end up in the Cold Palace or worse, sentenced to death by white silk or poison.

Leaving aside the emperor's affection for Consort Chen, in terms of rank alone, a consort was far inferior to an empress. The empress might survive after plotting against a concubine, but what about a consort? Could Consort Chen enjoy such protection?

"Sir Xu, Sir Xu?"

The little eunuch's voice snapped Xu Qi'an out of his thoughts, but he still couldn't come up with a solution that would satisfy everyone. Meanwhile, some lingering doubts remained unsolved even after discovering that Consort Chen was behind everything.

"I'll go back first... I won't report this to Duke Wei yet. For Lin'an's sake, I need to think this through..."

As they approached the palace gate, the eunuch guarding it shot Xu Qi'an a resentful glance. However, when Xu Qi'an came near, the eunuch immediately straightened up and acted respectfully.

"By the way, you took my silver. Did you pass along my message inside?" Xu Qi'an stopped in front of the gatekeeper eunuch.

"Of course!" The eunuch sighed helplessly. "I passed on your message, but Lang'er said she wouldn't see you. I didn't want to return the banknote, but I also didn't know how to explain it to you..."

So, she was prepared for this... Xu Qi'an nodded and was about to leave when Lang'er's voice called out from behind.

"Sir Xu, wait!"

"Lang'er."

Xu Qi'an's back muscles tensed involuntarily, but he turned around with a calm expression. "What is it?"

The beautiful palace maid stopped in her tracks, offering a faint smile. "The consort wishes to thank you in person for solving Consort Fu's case and for clearing the crown prince's name. She invites you to come and speak with her."

...Xu Qi'an's recently relaxed muscles tensed once more. Maybe because he felt like a guilty thief, his scalp began to tingle.

"I have important duties to attend to and can't stay long. Solving Consort Fu's case was just my duty. There's no need for the consort to thank me." He really didn't want to meet with Consort Chen now.

"Sir Xu is too modest." Lang'er covered her mouth with a slight smile and added playfully, "The consort said if you don't see her, she won't let you take half a step out of Jingxiu Palace."

...you motherfucker!

Xu Qi'an's heart suddenly sank. He quietly dispersed his primordial spirit to sense the surroundings, confirming that no "danger signals" were detected. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief.

I haven't told anyone about my discovery, and even Lang'er didn't notice anything unusual. There's no way Consort Chen could know that I've seen through her scheme. She probably just wants to thank me and put on a show... After all, this is the imperial palace. Outside, there are the Imperial Guards, and inside, there's Lin'an, along with this little eunuch sent by Emperor Yuanjing to supervise me. Consort Chen wouldn't dare do anything to me here...

Besides, my cultivation is at the level where I could take down two Li Yuchuns with one strike. I'm no pushover.

"Alright, may I trouble Miss Lang'er to lead the way."

Xu Qi'an turned to the little eunuch and said, "You follow as well."

The two of them followed behind Lang'er, dressed in a lotus-pink palace dress, through the corridors of the front courtyard and into the rear.

The main building of Jingxiu Palace was a delicately constructed two-storey pavilion, with layers of black tiles, flying eaves, and intricately carved roof beams. Four corners of the roof were guarded by twelve animal-shaped roof ornaments.

The second floor had a watchtower, ideal for drinking wine and admiring the scenery during the spring blooms or autumn breezes.

Upon entering the inner courtyard, the little eunuch coughed lightly as a signal.

Xu Qi'an understood the gesture and stopped in the courtyard.

Lang'er continued walking into the inner room. Shortly after, Xu Qi'an caught her delicate voice saying, "Madam, Sir Xu has arrived."

Consort Chen responded with a soft "hmm" and said gently, "I have some words for Sir Xu. You all may leave, go to the outer courtyard."

Then came Lin'an's voice, protesting in a playful tone, "Huh? Even I have to leave? I don't want to leave."

"Lin'an, be obedient."

"...Hmph."

... What does Consort Chen mean by this? Why dismiss everyone? What could she possibly need to say that can't be discussed openly in broad daylight? Xu Qi'an frowned.

Soon after, Lin'an and two palace maids stepped out of the room. As they passed by Xu Qi'an, Lin'an mischievously stuck out her tongue and whispered, "Remember to report back to us later."

The little eunuch hesitated, unsure of what to do, until Lang'er said, "Madam said everyone must leave. Didn't you hear?"

"Ah." The little eunuch nodded in compliance and turned to follow them.

"Wait," Xu Qi'an called out, admonishing, "You've been assigned to supervise me by His Majesty. You should carry yourself with the dignity of a special envoy—stand up straight."

He then raised his voice, saying, "I am, after all, an outsider. It would not be proper for me to meet with Consort Chen in private. This eunuch is tasked with supervising me under His Majesty's orders."

Though outwardly addressed to Lang'er, these words were meant for Consort Chen inside.

After a brief silence, Consort Chen's voice came from within: "Then let him wait outside."

"Stand back... a little farther," Xu Qi'an waved the eunuch away.

The little eunuch obediently retreated to a distance.

Standing in the courtyard, Xu Qi'an pretended to tidy his appearance, but in reality, he was using the brief moment to weigh the pros and cons, speculating about what might happen next.

If it's merely to thank me, there's no need to dismiss everyone. In other words, what Consort Chen wants to say to me mustn't be heard by others.

By having the eunuch stand farther away, I offer a form of compromise to Consort Chen. From a distance, the eunuch won't hear our conversation, but he will still be able to clearly see all our actions inside the room.

This prevents Consort Chen from pretending to be the victim, and framing me for bullying a consort... Even though that would be a rather crude manoeuvre, I can't be too cautious.

With his thoughts settled, he stepped into the room and saw Noble Consort Chen sitting on a cushioned platform, dressed in a magnificent palace gown.

This was the second time Xu Qi'an had seen Noble Consort Chen. The first time was last year's ancestral worship ceremony, where he had loudly collapsed Yongzhen Shanhe Temple and then pretended to offer his loyalty, getting a close look at the Emperor's women.

Consort Chen had the same face shape as Lin'an—a classic oval face with perfectly proportioned features, including her eyebrows, lips, and nose.

In terms of pure beauty, Consort Chen was slightly inferior to the Empress, but her dignified and gentle demeanor exuded more warmth and approachability than the Empress.

However, the luxurious embroidered gown and her elaborate, expensive headdress diminished some of that approachability.

Of all the women Xu Qi'an had seen, only Lin'an could pull off such extravagant clothing and jewelry. The more lavish the attire, the more her charm shone through.

It's similar to how some women look better without makeup, but when they overdo it, they appear garish. Lin'an, on the other hand, looked even more captivating the more ornately she was dressed.

In this regard, the mother and daughter were quite different.

"This morning, His Majesty brought up the matter of deposing the Empress in court. Sir Xu must have heard," Consort Chen said, her voice softer and more refined than a young girl's, with the warmth of a mature woman, making one feel as if bathed in a gentle spring breeze.

"Your subordinate is aware," Xu Qi'an nodded tersely.

"Then why has Sir Xu come to Jingxiu Palace?" she asked.

"There are still some doubts in this case."

"Oh?" Consort Chen replied with a faint smile, "What doubts?"

"This... your servant is ignorant, and has no clear leads yet."

The room fell silent as Consort Chen stared at Xu Qi'an for a long time, her smile gradually fading. After a pause, her face became cold as frost, and she said, word by word:

"You are lying!"

Those three words struck Xu Qi'an's heart like a heavy hammer and exploded like thunder in his ears.

How does she know I'm lying? His eyes instinctively flashed with cold light, and his breath quickened. But in the next moment, he reined in all his emotions, feigning confusion as he asked:

"Madam, what do you mean by that?"

"You can use the Qi-watching technique to observe others, but others can also use it to observe you."

Consort Chen calmly sipped her tea before continuing, "We invited you here today merely to probe, but your lie has left us with no choice but to abandon any lingering hope. Sir Xu is sharp-minded, and to you, even the most intricate case is just a trivial game."

Consort Chen... is an Arcanist?! That's impossible.

Why is she confessing this to me? Isn't she afraid I'll report it to Emperor Yuanjing?

What is her true intention in summoning me here?

A flood of thoughts crossed Xu Qi'an's mind, but they all culminated in a sigh: "Madam, why? I can pretend to know nothing."

Then, mentally, he added: *And later, I'll inform Duke Wei and Princess Huaqing to deal with you...*

At this point, the two of them had essentially laid their cards on the table.

Consort Chen's forthrightness surprised Xu Qi'an. He knew this could only spell trouble.

"When did you figure it out? Just now?" Consort Chen asked casually while sipping her tea.

"Yes, your subordinate noticed Lang'er's disguise."

"But you were already suspicious before that, weren't you? Tell me." Consort Chen smiled slightly.

Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment before replying, "As I reviewed the details of the Consort Fu case, certain doubts arose. Why would Madam, for no reason, place the Baichun wine, gifted by the Empress, on the table? This is, after all, the inner palace. Why would you serve such a tonic to make the Crown Prince tipsy, without fear that he might act inappropriately? It doesn't align with Madam's cautious nature."

Back when Princess Huaqing recounted the Empress's fall from grace, she had mentioned how Consort Chen was meticulous and protective of the Crown Prince's position, but also narrow-minded and overly cautious. This had sparked Xu Qi'an's initial doubts.

He continued, "Although the Empress could have bribed Huang Xiaorou to set a trap for the Crown Prince, how could she guarantee that the Crown Prince would go to Qingfeng Hall? But you, as the Crown Prince's biological mother, know him best. You knew he still had feelings for Consort Fu, so you sent Huang Xiaorou halfway through to wait for an opportunity... this reasoning makes much more sense."

"After that, from the discovery of Huang Xiaorou's body to the clues your subordinate found pointing to the Empress, the signs of manipulation were too obvious. If Huang Xiaorou had just disappeared, it wouldn't have been enough to frame the Empress."

"At that time, I still thought the Empress was the prime suspect. What puzzled me was why you would send someone to tear up the account books from the Imperial Pharmacy, which should have been the most incriminating evidence against the Empress. Instead of helping, it revealed your involvement."

The Consort shook her head. "It wasn't redundant. That evidence was deliberately left behind. If the official in charge of the investigation hadn't been you, it would have been one of the most useful pieces of evidence against the Empress."

"But your miraculous survival caught us completely off guard. If both Huang Xiaorou's body and the pharmacy's records had been discovered together, the signs of manipulation would have been too obvious. We feared you might notice something and report it directly to His Majesty, so we had someone destroy the books."

"That's why you had doubts but didn't outright accuse the Empress of being wrongly framed. If His Majesty had known in advance, my tearful plea yesterday wouldn't have been as effective.

"Then, by learning about the investigation's progress through Lin'an, I applied pressure on His Majesty while sending assassins after you. As long as you died and the Empress confessed, everything would have been seamless."

Xu Qi'an nodded slowly. This morning, he still thought the Empress was the most likely to have ordered the assassination and was determined to divorce Huaqing. It wasn't until Wei Yuan told him about the Empress's confession that he realized something else was at play.

So it was Consort Chen who wanted me dead. Well, there's nothing more to say—I must divorce Lin'an now.

"I have two more questions, Madam. Can you answer them?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Go ahead," the Consort replied indifferently.

"The Crown Prince is already the Crown Prince. Why go to such lengths?"

The Consort smiled, but it was a complicated smile, as if she were mocking Xu Qi'an, or perhaps mocking herself.

"The Crown Prince may be the Crown Prince, but as long as he doesn't ascend the throne, there will always be a chance for someone else to take his place. The Empress will always be the Empress, and the Fourth Prince will always be the legitimate son. What if I told you that His Majesty originally intended for the Fourth Prince to be Crown Prince? If His Majesty hadn't realised the Empress never truly loved him, the Fourth Prince would already be the Crown Prince."

Xu Qi'an keenly noticed that when Consort Chen said this, there was both satisfaction and resentment in her eyes.

"But even so, after all these years, the Crown Prince's position has remained unchanged. Aren't you worrying too much?"

"What do you know about court politics?" Consort Chen scoffed. "As long as Wei Yuan is around, the Fourth Prince will always have a better chance than my son. Wei Yuan has always dreamed of controlling the court and wiping out the old ills. To fulfill his ambitions, he would undoubtedly push the Fourth Prince onto the throne.

"I'm just a woman; I can't compete with Wei Yuan. I can only strike through the Empress. The Empress is the mistress of the inner palace, the role model for all women, the highest honor a woman can achieve. As a woman myself, of course, I covet her position."

Xu Qi'an, having some understanding of Wei Yuan's ambitions, believed her words.

"One last question, madam. Who is the person behind you?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Consort Chen was visibly startled. She remained silent for a long time before shaking her head with a smile. "I am growing more and more fond of you. It seems Lin'an has inadvertently discovered a treasure.

"How did you figure out I had someone behind me?"

Xu Qi'an lowered his gaze, contemplating, and then said, "If Madam had known about the Imperial Uncle's actions for a long time, why wait until now to act? And if Madam had only recently learned of what the Imperial Uncle and Huang Xiaorou were up to, who told you? It certainly wouldn't have been Huang Xiaorou. She wouldn't suddenly change her stance after enduring for so many years. There must have been someone acting as a bridge.

"Furthermore, Madam knew I was lying earlier. The Qi-watching technique of the Sitianjian isn't something just anyone can perform. I recently came up with another possibility."

Xu Qi'an lifted his head and gazed at the beautiful face of Consort Chen. "Your target is the Empress, but the person or faction behind you aims for Wei Yuan."

Consort Chen's smile disappeared. She narrowed her eyes and studied Xu Qi'an for a long time before suddenly asking, "What do you think of Lin'an?"

Very nice... Xu Qi'an's heart skipped a beat, but he said nothing.

"The Crown Prince once told me that Lin'an has reached the age to marry. I kept an eye out, and soon noticed that ever since she met you, the person she talks about most when visiting Jingxiu Palace is you."

Consort Chen gently urged, "Young girls fall in love easily. I understand this well, having experienced it myself. I heard you will soon be ennobled. Although a viscount isn't a high title, it means you've stepped into the ranks of nobility.

"I can promise you that within three years, your rank will rise. By then, I will marry Lin'an to you."

This was a blatant attempt at recruitment, which also explained why she had been so forthright with him.

Xu Qi'an hesitated.

Sensing this, Consort Chen pressed on, "Even though you know my secret, you cannot accuse me. I could simply say that Lang'er has fallen ill recently and passed away despite the court physicians' efforts. What do you think of that?"

How could such an innocent and adorable Lin'an have a mother like you? You think I'll be fooled by such empty promises... Xu Qi'an thought. He replied, "Three years is too long. How do I know Madam won't deceive me?"

Consort Chen frowned, "Two years, then. Ennoblement isn't a small matter. You should understand that."

"That's not what I meant," Xu Qi'an waved his hand, flashing a bashful smile. "I meant, if marriage has to wait three years, can we at least consummate it first?"

Chapter 256. Xu Qi'an: I've Contributed Again

"Are you mocking us?"

"Ice" slowly crept onto Noble Consort Chen's face—her expression, her gaze, and her tone of voice all turned cold.

"Would you look at that," Xu 's shrugged and sneered, "No matter how sweetly someone paints a picture, the moment real payment is required, they immediately turn hostile."

Good thing you didn't agree—otherwise, I'd rather see Lin'an heartbroken than let you win.

Noble Consort Chen took a sip of tea, and when she set the cup down, her face had returned to its usual calm. "Our greatest flaw is Lang'er. As long as she is no more, there will be no evidence left to prove anything.

"And with the blink of an eye, Fengqi Palace is about to collapse. As they say, a wise bird chooses a good tree to nest in. Sir Xu is a clever man; surely you know the right choice."

Xu Qi'an nodded in agreement, "The Crown Prince remains the Crown Prince, and the Empress is about to be deposed. You, Madam, have promised to marry Lin'an to me... so, I choose Duke Wei."

Noble Consort Chen's expression stiffened, and her grip on the teacup tightened. It took a long time before she resisted the urge to either splash the hot tea in his face or smash the cup.

"So, Sir Xu intends to take Lang'er away from Jingxiu Palace and bring us down?"

Noble Consort Chen's beautiful eyes locked onto Xu 's. The atmosphere in the room dropped to freezing, and a deadly pressure enveloped him.

Though Xu 's, at his Refining Spirit level, couldn't detect the exact moment of danger, the instincts of a seventh-rank martial artist screamed: Danger!

If I insist on taking Lang'er, it's be a mutual destruction—Noble Consort Chen will have no choice but to throw caution to the wind. She won't care that this is the harem and will strike at me. My life wouldn't be guaranteed... Though I still have Master Shenshu as a last resort... Xu 's smirked, straightening his posture with a look of disdain.

"I, Xu 's, once faced thousands of rebels alone, cut down thousands of enemies, and remained standing even in death. Does Madam think a mere threat would scare me?

"A servant fears not death. How could one intimidate me with it?"

A servant fears not death. How could one intimidate me with it... Noble Consort Chen's eyes showed surprise. She nodded slowly. "Well said. Sir Xu is truly a hero. To fall at your hands..."

The consort tightened her grip on the cup, as if ready to smash it as a signal.

Suddenly, Xu 's said loudly, "But my heart is sincere towards Lin'an. I do not wish to see her heartbroken. I can pretend today's events never happened."

Even if I plan to expose the consort, I must first make sure I walk out of Jingxiu Palace alive... Xu 's thought with regret.

Noble Consort Chen studied him for a moment, then set down her teacup, nodding with satisfaction. "You're not lying. It seems you truly care for Lin'an. If that's the case, why not join us?"

Do you take me for a fool? If I join you, I'm as good as dead. In the capital, the only person I can rely on is Duke Wei. Even Princess Huaqing can only be trusted halfway. As for Lin'an, she's just a powerless princess—there's no way she could protect me.

"Madam, one does not win loyalty with empty promises but through tangible actions. I serve Duke Wei because he treats me with sincerity. I trust him."

With that, Xu 's turned slightly, casting a glance at the eunuch waiting outside the courtyard. "It's not that I am helpless against Madam, but I don't think Madam can do much to me either."

Once the mutual destruction scenario was off the table, Noble Consort Chen wouldn't dare push him further.

Though the eunuch was just a lackey, he was currently Emperor Yuanjing's eyes, serving as surveillance. Everything that happened here would be reported to the emperor without fail.

Unless Noble Consort Chen killed him outright, any plot or scheme against Xu 's would be useless—the eunuch could testify on his behalf.

That was precisely why Xu 's had insisted the eunuch stay.

Noble Consort Chen took a long, deep look at him, her beautiful eyes narrowing. "We are tired. You may leave... The doors of Jingxiu Palace will always be open for you."

"Your servant takes his leave."

Xu 's cupped his hands and bowed before exiting the room.

As he stepped into the courtyard, the eunuch hurried over. "Sir Xu, what did the Noble Consort say to you?"

"Don't ask. If you do, you'll lose your head," Xu 's replied irritably.

The eunuch's face turned pale.

In the outer courtyard, Lin'an sat in a pavilion, resting her chin in her hand while idly toying with a teacup. Two palace maids stood by her side.

Upon seeing Xu 's, her round face lit up with a radiant smile. Her almond-shaped eyes curved into crescent moons as she waved and called out in a sweet voice, "Running Dog, come here!"

There was no authority behind her words—she sounded more like she was pouting.

Xu 's took a deep breath, suppressing the surge of emotions, and forced a smile as he said casually, "Your Highness, I'm back."

Lin'an immediately asked, "What did my mother say to you?"

"Her Highness mentioned that you're nearing the age to be married and asked if I knew of any suitable young talents to recommend. She said she would help find a match for you."

Lin'an blinked, and a faint blush crept across her cheeks. Suspicious, she asked, "Would my mother really say that to you?"

...Eh, why aren't you falling into my trap? When did you get so clever? I was planning to recommend myself next... Xu 's had no choice but to say, "I was just joking."

Lin'an's eyebrows shot up. "Running Dog, how dare you tease us!"

She placed her hands on her hips and glared at him.

"I'm still a child, Your Highness—I don't even know what teasing means."

Lin'an pouted and playfully tutted, but then found Xu 's's words amusing, laughing with a tinkling sound like a little hen clucking.

Her laughter was both innocent and alluring, as if she herself was a beautiful scene.

Xu 's laughed along with her, but deep down, he sighed.

Earlier, he had planned to feign ignorance, leave Jingxiu Palace first, and then report his findings to Duke Wei, who could swiftly arrest Lang'er, catching Noble Consort Chen off guard.

But due to Lin'an, he hesitated. Although he remained clear-headed in the end and would still expose Noble Consort Chen, his moment of hesitation had been costly.

Noble Consort Chen is skilled. As soon as I leave, Lang'er will "fall ill" and die, leaving her with no flaws. This way, Noble Consort Chen will have no more weaknesses to exploit.

"Noble Consort Chen is indeed a competent royal consort... But Lin'an, this silly girl—growing up within these palace walls, I can't tell if it's a blessing or a curse."

Reflecting on Noble Consort Chen's earlier moves, Xu 's had to admit her sharpness. First, she called him to test the waters. Sure enough, she sensed something amiss.

Then she laid everything out in a seemingly open-hearted manner, but in truth, she was unafraid because she knew that once Lang'er was dealt with, Xu 's would have no leverage. Moreover, Xu 's wouldn't be able to take Lang'er with him unless he wanted to die.

Once she realized the threat, she decided to be straightforward, gaining his trust in the process. Then, she dangled the carrot—her beautiful daughter—as bait. *Had I been the lecherous type, I might have fallen right into her trap...*

I have Master Shenshu to protect me, so I may not die on the spot. However, it would expose me, and that dog Emperor Yuanjing would undoubtedly seal me under Sangpo lake. In the end, the result remains the same—mutual destruction.

After leaving Jingxiu Palace, Xu Qi'an excused himself from Biaobiao's invitation to play Five-in-a-row, claiming he had urgent business to attend to.

"Little Eunuch, my work in the palace is complete. When you report to His Majesty later, there are some things you should say, and some things you should not. Let me advise you." Xu Qi'an spoke solemnly.

The eunuch straightened his posture at the seriousness in Xu Qi'an's tone. "Sir, please go ahead."

"Regarding Jingxiu Palace, you must report everything to His Majesty, word for word. Tell him this: After questioning the maid, Langer, Sir Xu looked extremely upset, as if he did not wish to linger in the palace any longer, not even to drink tea.

"Yet before Sir Xu could leave, Consort Chen suddenly called him back and invited him to the rear courtyard. The Consort dismissed everyone and had a private conversation with Sir Xu in the room. Though I could see them, I couldn't hear what they discussed."

After Xu Qi'an finished, he took out a five-tael silver note, along with another five taels he extorted from the palace gatekeeper eunuch, making a total of ten taels, and handed them to the eunuch without any fuss.

The eunuch, while accepting the money, protested, "Sir, I cannot accept this," even as he pocketed it.

After carefully reflecting on Xu Qi'an's instructions and finding no issues, he nodded. "Your servant will follow your orders to the letter."

With that settled, Xu Qi'an left the palace and quickly rode back to the Nightwatchers Constabulary on the horse Princess Huaiqing had lent him.

After being announced by the guards, he ascended to the seventh floor of the Tower of Noble Spirit and entered the tearoom.

Wei Yuan was not in the tearoom but on the balcony connected to it. Sitting in a large chair with his hair down, a black-robed officer was combing his hair.

Wei Yuan gestured for Xu Qi'an to come over. "Come, comb my hair."

The black-robed officer tactfully handed the comb to Xu Qi'an and left the room.

"Why is Duke Wei having his hair combed at a time like this?" Xu Qi'an asked as he ran the comb through Wei Yuan's hair, finding it surprisingly smooth and free of tangles.

"In Buddhism, hair symbolizes worldly troubles," Wei Yuan said, his eyes half-closed as he basked in the warm sunlight. "Combing through it wipes away past troubles, leaving them behind."

What does that mean?

Wei Yuan seems a little off today. What did he mean by "leaving the past behind"?

"Combing seems pointless. How about I massage your head instead?" Xu Qi'an offered.

Wei Yuan chuckled. "Go ahead, try."

Xu Qi'an pocketed the comb and began gently massaging Wei Yuan's head, focusing on the pressure points.

Wei Yuan's breathing gradually slowed. The warm sunlight bathed them both, and the serene atmosphere made Xu Qi'an feel as if he had returned to the mortal world, far from the palace intrigues.

"Not bad," Wei Yuan said with a smile.

Of course, this is a massage technique from barbershops back home. I should get you a shampoo chair someday... Xu Qi'an cleared his throat and said, "Your servant has something to report."

"Go ahead."

"Your servant has discovered the person behind everything."

Wei Yuan opened his eyes but remained silent for a while.

"It's Consort Chen!" Xu Qi'an said softly. "Today, while investigating Jingxiu Palace, I found out that her maid, Lang'er, was the one who destroyed the Imperial Pharmacy records..."

He then relayed the entire story, including Consort Chen's attempt to recruit him.

Wei Yuan patted his hand, signaling him to stop, then got up and walked to the edge of the observation deck. With both hands resting on the railing, he gazed into the distance. "Who do you think is backing Consort Chen?"

How would I know... Xu Qi'an shook his head. "It might be connected to the Sitianjian."

This was his deduction based on the existence of the Qi-watching technique.

"It's not the Sitianjian," Wei Yuan said with certainty.

Not the Sitianjian... It took Xu Qi'an a few seconds to process this before he exclaimed, "Duke Wei, you knew Consort Chen was plotting against the Empress and you?"

"Initially, I didn't suspect her. But she's ruthless enough to drag the Crown Prince down with her. After I handed this case over to you, I stopped paying attention to it. It wasn't until this morning, after hearing the Empress had confessed, and listening to your account, that I realized it was her."

Xu Qi'an stared at Wei Yuan's back for a long time. He used to think that Wei Yuan and Daoist Jinlian were both crafty schemers, but now he realized that Daoist Jinlian was quite pure-hearted compared to Wei Yuan.

If it's not the Sitianjian, how could Consort Chen use the Qi-watching technique? Who else besides the Sitianjian can use that?

Suddenly, Xu Qi'an's mind clicked. "Duke Wei, I just remembered something."

"The third rank Arcanist who appeared in the Yunzhou case?" Wei Yuan asked.

"Duke Wei, your wisdom is unparalleled..." Xu Qi'an was impressed.

"I's looked into that person but found nothing. Do you know what the title of a third grade Arcanist in the Sitianjian is?" Wei Yuan asked.

"Master of Heaven's Secrets." Xu Qi'an replied, having heard it from the King of Posturing.

"A Master of Heaven's Secrets can shield their presence from the heavens. They can erase all traces of their existence, making their parents, spouses, and children forget them, and even wiping out all written records about them. This is their ability.

"Moreover, a Master of Heaven's Secrets can alter others' memories of them, leaving only a vague impression in their minds that no amount of recall can fully restore."

Wei Yuan gazed into the distance. "During the Sangpo case, you tried to find information about the first Jianzheng, but there was no trace, not even a whisper. Keep in mind, Emperor Wuzong could alter history, but he couldn't silence the people or suppress folk tales.

"It was Jianzheng who erased all traces of the first Jianzheng. He's like someone who never existed. Even I sometimes mistakenly think Jianzheng founded the Sitianjian and created the Arcanist system.

"Then, the gaps in history remind me that there was another, the first Jianzheng."

"How can we investigate this?" Xu Qi'an was dumbfounded.

Once again, he realized how terrifying the top-level masters in this world could be.

"To investigate, you'd need Jianzheng's help," Wei Yuan said.

That makes sense. Only magic can defeat magic. Duke Wei's thinking is spot-on... Xu Qi'an nodded inwardly.

"But the Jianzheng refused," Wei Yuan sighed.

*As expected. The Sitianjian holds many secrets, and Jianzheng is like an old man guarding them...

* Xu Qi'an pursed his lips and curiously asked, "Duke Wei, do you know what the titles for the first and second ranks of Arcanists are?"

Wei Yuan shook his head. "The Jianzheng and I have always been at odds. The Great Feng is like a chessboard. He plays, and so do I. We often clash due to our differing strategies."

This was the first time Wei Yuan had discussed such "high-level" matters with Xu Qi'an.

Perhaps, in Wei Yuan's eyes, the Jianzheng was his greatest political rival. Xu Qi'an tentatively asked, "How do you plan to save the Empress?"

"I'll have to push the Imperial Uncle to take the fall. Whether that works or not remains to be seen. The Emperor enjoys balancing power and will consider deposing the Empress, as that would leave the Crown Prince without an adversary. But recently, the Emperor has been reminded of some unpleasant memories, and he might not be thinking clearly—unless we can make him suspicious of Consort Chen...

"The Empress has too soft a heart. She should have consulted me before making this move." Wei Yuan's voice held a trace of helplessness.

Is Duke Wei indirectly calling the Empress an unreliable teammate? Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up. It seemed that his earlier efforts in the palace had not been in vain. He might have even contributed.

"Duke Wei, your servant must confess—I took matters into my own hands earlier."

Wei Yuan turned and frowned slightly. "What did you do?"

Chapter 257. Inquiry

"Before leaving the palace, your subordinate took the liberty of doing something extra. I instructed the little eunuch overseeing us for His Majesty to..."

Xu Qi'an relayed to Wei Yuan exactly what he had taught the young eunuch to say.

Seeing Wei Yuan fall into deep thought, Xu Qi'an quickly added, "Your servant acted on his own initiative without permission. Please could Duke Wei give judgement on the situation."

Upon hearing this, Wei Yuan smiled and nodded. "Though it was done without orders, you did well. His Majesty is suspicious by nature and adept at maintaining balance. Your words, once relayed to him, will sow seeds of doubt toward Noble Consort Chen in his mind. This will prompt him to reconsider the entire case of Consort Fu, weighing the benefits and drawbacks from all sides, and reflect on the delicate balance he's been maintaining."

Xu Qi'an was still somewhat unsatisfied and said hesitantly, "But what if His Majesty sees through it? Or if the little eunuch confesses to accepting bribes and passing along my message?"

"There's no flaw in your account—everything you told him genuinely happened," Wei Yuan replied with a smile. "As for the other issue, the eunuch revealing your bribe would only expose his own corruption, which would harm him without offering any benefit. After all, anyone smart enough to serve within His Majesty's inner chambers isn't likely to be that foolish."

Hehe, I already knew that... Xu Qi'an inwardly praised Wei Yuan's wisdom, saying admiringly, "Duke Wei, you are indeed supremely intelligent. Your subordinate is truly in awe."

Wei Yuan shot him a knowing glance, then shook his head with a quiet laugh.

Feeling light-hearted, Wei Yuan returned to the tea room and personally poured two cups of tea. "Now that you've entered the Refining Spirit stage, don't stop honing your primordial spirit. Once you feel pressure building up in the Outer meridians, you can start training your physical body ahead of schedule."

Outer meridians... oh, he's referring to the temples.

Xu Qi'an was momentarily puzzled before realizing that the "Outer meridians" referred to what he knew as the temples—though in this world, there was no such term as "temples."

"Outer meridians" sounds so much more high-class and sophisticated... Xu Qi'an never really liked the term "temples" anyway, as it always felt more like a verb to him.[^1]

When the topic shifted to body tempering, Xu Qi'an knew that his recent actions had been well-received. Wei Yuan, in a good mood, was now ready to reward him.

That seemingly apologetic yet subtly boastful gesture Xu Qi'an made earlier? Wei Yuan, with his keen mind, had seen through it instantly. But leaders always appreciate subordinates who elevate their position—and even someone as brilliant as Wei Yuan wasn't immune to that charm.

Had Xu Qi'an simply said, "Duke Wei, I've done something big again, haha!" the reaction would have been entirely different. Wei Yuan might have chastised him for arrogance and reminded him to remain humble.

"Body tempering?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Training the body was the main focus of the Refining Vitality stage—basically, a combination of aerobic and anaerobic exercises, pushing one's physical limits again and again. Every three days, it was necessary to see a physician to ease muscle strain, and one had to continually consume large amounts of meat and nourishing herbal tonics.

Xu Qi'an had “eaten” nearly a hundred taels of silver in a year during his training—about half of what his uncle earned annually.

Having reached the Refining Spirit stage, the methods from the Refining Vitality stage were clearly no longer effective, and Xu Qi'an was unsure how to continue training his body.

"I've told you before, the martial system was not developed overnight. It has been constantly refined by countless predecessors to form the Nine Ranks of martial artists we know today."

Wei Yuan sipped his tea, settling into a reflective conversation. "The earliest method for achieving Bronze Skin and Iron Bones was to repeatedly strike the body with sticks and clubs, much like a blacksmith hammering raw iron into refined steel. The process was long and arduous, and if the foundation was not solid, one could die from a blow to a vital area."

Duke Wei, are you referring to that *kind of vital area...?* Xu Qi'an couldn't help but think of a disastrous scenario—chickens flying and eggs smashed.

"Later, someone invented medicinal baths using rare natural ingredients as the main components. Martial artists would sit in large cauldrons, breathing and resisting the heat, while absorbing the medicinal essence to temper their bodies and achieve Bronze Skin and Iron Bones."

"How dangerous was that?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"It was still very risky. Sometimes, the person would be...cooked," Wei Yuan answered.

"..."

Xu Qi'an's mind immediately conjured an image: he was sitting in a large cauldron surrounded by boiling water, while the medicine-savvy Chu Caiwei kept adding seasonings like star anise, beans, cinnamon, and spring onions...

Meanwhile, Xu Lingyin stood beside the cauldron, tears flowing from the corners of her mouth.

"Is there a safer method?" he asked, swallowing nervously.

"With the emergence of successive geniuses, a method was eventually developed—one that used Qi refining as the foundation and body tempering as a supplement. The core of this method lies in a unique Qi-circulating technique that tempers the body from the inside out. When combined with strikes or medicinal baths, the risks are greatly reduced."

Wei Yuan unfolded a piece of paper and wrote the words "Mixed Primordial Art" on it. He then said, "The Nightwatchers' most advanced technique is called the Mixed Primordial Art. Every Gold Gong uses this technique. If this were to be leaked to the Jianghu, it would cause a storm of bloodshed."

Once again, Xu Qi'an realized the immense benefits of working under Wei Yuan and joining the Nightwatchers. Here, he had access to the finest techniques and the most luxurious resources—things that wandering martial artists could only dream of. For Xu Qi'an, they were readily available.

Including that visualisation drawing—it, too, was top-tier.

Xu Qi'an had reached the Refining Spirit stage so quickly thanks to his impressive talent, but Wei Yuan's resources had played an equally crucial role.

The martial artist's path truly is one of hard labour. To break it down with modern knowledge, the ninth rank is the "brick-carrying" stage; the eighth rank adds Qi techniques to brick-carrying; the seventh rank is about breaking one's body with sheer effort. And the sixth rank? It's straight-up chest-breaking feats... Xu Qi'an sighed and asked, "Duke Wei, is there a Qi-circulating technique that can achieve Bronze Skin and Iron Bones without the need for medicinal baths or stick strikes?"

"There is!"

Wei Yuan's answer took Xu Qi'an by surprise. Xu Qi'an was first delighted, then tentatively asked, "In dreams, perhaps?"

...Wei Yuan looked at him in silence for a few seconds, then said gently, "Buddhism has similar techniques. Some say that the martial artist's Bronze Skin and Iron Bones were derived from the Buddhist Vajra Body. Others believe that the Buddha himself modelled his techniques after the martial artist's system, creating the path of the warrior monk."

So, the warrior monk system includes a method for achieving Bronze Skin and Iron Bones without needing medicinal baths or stick strikes. This is perfect—I'll just get some tricks from Number Six next time... Xu Qi'an unconsciously revealed a pure and innocent smile.

...

The Emperor's Bedchamber

Emperor Yuanjing sat cross-legged on his bed, eyes closed as he practiced his breathing. A thin column of incense smoke rose from a burning stick at the corner of the bed, straight and slender.

An old eunuch stood to one side, head lowered, eyes downcast, making not a single sound.

At this moment, footsteps echoed from outside. A young eunuch stopped at the entrance to the bedchamber.

Glancing at the Emperor, who was entering a state of tranquillity, the old eunuch shuffled over to the door and lowered his voice, "What is it?"

"Godfather, the Daoist Leader from Lingbao Temple has sent someone to invite His Majesty," the young eunuch whispered.

The old eunuch was visibly taken aback, silently counting the days on his fingers. He thought to himself that the timing was right. Every month at this time, the National Teacher would retreat to recuperate, as her body became indisposed.

Even the Emperor couldn't disturb her, and would stay in his bedchamber to practice his breathing exercises.

"I see. You may leave."

After sending the young eunuch away, the old eunuch slowly returned to the Emperor's side and softly called out, "Your Majesty..."

Emperor Yuanjing opened his eyes.

"The National Teacher has sent for you, inviting Your Majesty to join her in meditative reflection," said the old eunuch.

A hint of surprise flashed across Emperor Yuanjing's face. Then, for the first time, his usually calm, deep eyes gleamed with an unusual brightness.

"Prepare our carriage, quickly!"

Every month, the National Teacher suffered from the torment of karmic fire, her seven emotions and six desires surging uncontrollably. During this time, she would retreat into isolation, and no one was allowed to enter Lingbao Temple.

But Emperor Yuanjing knew that if there was ever a day the National Teacher agreed to dual cultivation with him, it would surely be during this period.

He had been waiting for this day for a long time. Though his black hair had regrown, and his body was as strong as a man in his prime, he had still not attained immortality.

If he wanted to go further, the only way was through dual cultivation with the National Teacher, to absorb her spiritual essence. Only then could he achieve true longevity and become the eternal Emperor of Feng.

Leaving the bedchamber, he boarded his dragon palanquin, urging the bearers along. Before long, they arrived at Lingbao Temple.

But when he saw the National Teacher, a woman, his hopes were dashed as he realized that she had merely invited him for their usual meditation, much like their previous practice sessions.

The female National Teacher, with a vermillion dot between her brows, her features as delicate as a painting, sat cross-legged on a prayer cushion. Her soft voice rang out, "Your Majesty, please sit."

Her jet-black hair was tied up with a lotus crown, accentuating her flawless, fair face. Not a single strand of hair was out of place.

Emperor Yuanjing was unwilling to accept this and said in a low voice, "If the National Teacher does not wish to engage in dual cultivation, why summon Us at this time?"

Luo Yuheng, eyes still closed, responded calmly, "This month, We are not tormented by the karmic fire. This poor daoist has promised to teach Your Majesty the method of immortality. We dare not shirk our duty, not even for a day."

Emperor Yuanjing was silent for a moment. He sat on his designated prayer mat but did not immediately close his eyes. Instead, he said, "National Teacher, the materials for the Rejuvenation Pill have been prepared. Tomorrow, We will send them to Lingbao Temple."

Luo Yuheng opened her eyes and studied Emperor Yuanjing. After a moment, she sighed, "Your Majesty's black hair has returned, and after years of cultivation, you are immune to all illnesses. There is no longer any need to refine that divine Four Seasons medicine."

Emperor Yuanjing ignored her, closing his eyes and resuming his breathing exercises.

Every year, Emperor Yuanjing would refine four large batches of pills, corresponding to the four seasonal transitions of spring wind, summer solstice, autumn equinox, and winter solstice.

Each batch of these pills was worth a fortune, equivalent to three years of taxes from a county—one that was particularly wealthy at that.

In addition to the four large batches, there were thirty-six smaller batches of pills. The sheer amount of silver consumed was staggering.

None of this silver came from the imperial treasury managed by the Ministry of Revenue. Instead, it was from the Emperor's private coffers. As for how the silver ended up there, every court official knew, yet no one spoke of it.

By the time the meditation session with the National Teacher was over, the sun had already set.

Emperor Yuanjing, in a foul mood, returned to his bedchamber and fell silent. Remembering that the case involving Consort Fu was still unresolved, he impatiently said:

"Grand Companion, have the Cabinet draft an edict. The case of Consort Fu has been delayed for over ten days now. Order the Three Judicial Offices to present their findings within two days."

The findings on whether the Empress was guilty or not.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The old eunuch hesitated for a moment before softly adding, "That Xu Qi'an, came to the palace again today."

Emperor Yuanjing's brow furrowed. "What is he doing here again? Have someone retrieve his gold token from the Nightwatcher constabulary tomorrow."

The Empress had already confessed, and the Consort Fu case was nearly closed. There was no reason for that Bronze Gong to keep coming to the palace.

The old eunuch nodded and cautiously asked, "Shall I summon the eunuch to report today's findings?"

Emperor Yuanjing thought for a moment, then slowly nodded. "Summon him."

The old eunuch left the bedchamber and returned shortly, bringing in the young eunuch who had been monitoring Xu Qi'an.

The young eunuch kept his head lowered, his body bent, standing obediently before the Emperor.

Seated behind his desk, Emperor Yuanjing gazed down at the young eunuch from above and asked, "What did Xu Qi'an investigate in the palace today?"

Chapter 258. Bring Honour to the Family

"Today, Sir Xu had a list of individuals to inquire about who had entered and exited the Imperial Pharmacy..."

The little eunuch narrated smoothly, going through the list step by step. Emperor Yuanjing remained silent, his gaze distant, making it hard to tell whether he was listening intently or his thoughts had wandered elsewhere.

"The last person on the list was the head palace maid from Jingxiu Palace, by Consort Chen's side. Sir Xu attempted to question her but was refused entry."

At this point, Emperor Yuanjing's previously frozen eyes flickered slightly, as if his attention was drawn back.

"Sir Xu, with no other options, then went to Shaoyin Palace and sought the help of Princess Lin'an..."

The little eunuch recalled Sir Xu's instructions and continued naturally, "After questioning Consort Chen's maid, Lang'er, Sir Xu's expression darkened, and he seemed eager to leave, not even staying for tea before quickly departing with your servant..."

"But before he could leave Jingxiu Palace, Lang'er returned and said that Consort Chen invited Sir Xu to speak with her, to thank him for solving the case of Consort Fu. Sir Xu was initially reluctant, but Lang'er would not let him leave."

The little eunuch paused briefly, then continued, "After that, Consort Chen dismissed everyone, and I, too, was not allowed inside and had to wait in the courtyard..."

"Stop!"

Emperor Yuanjing's eyes regained their sharpness as he interrupted the eunuch, staring at him thoughtfully for a few seconds before slowly asking, "Dismissed everyone?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

“What did they talk about in the courtyard?”

The little eunuch replied, “I was too far away to hear clearly. All I could do was watch from a distance as Sir Xu and Consort Chen spoke inside.”

Emperor Yuanjing placed a hand to his lips, deep in thought, and suddenly said, “You mentioned earlier that Sir Xu’s expression turned grim after questioning Lang’er?”

Before the little eunuch could respond, the elderly eunuch’s face darkened as he scolded, “You blithering idiot! Did you not listen to your teachings?”

When reporting, never insert personal judgments, and don’t try to mislead the Emperor. Your job is to be impartial and objective.

Emperor Yuanjing raised a hand, signalling the elderly eunuch to stop his reprimand.

Encouraged by this, the little eunuch continued, “It was indeed grim.”

Emperor Yuanjing nodded, pondering for a moment before asking, “Sir Xu wanted to leave, but Lang’er stopped him?”

“...Yes, your Majesty.”

Sensing a shift in the Emperor’s attitude, the little eunuch cautiously added, “Sir Xu said he was carrying out his duty, and there was no need for Consort Chen to thank him. Lang’er replied that if Sir Xu didn’t meet with the Consort, he wouldn’t be able to leave Jingxiu Palace.”

Hearing this, Emperor Yuanjing’s eyes gleamed brightly. This time, he remained silent for a long while. The atmosphere in the chamber became eerily quiet, as the two eunuchs, one old and one young, held their breaths, afraid of disturbing the Emperor’s deep and unfathomable thoughts.

At last, Emperor Yuanjing slowly asked, “How was Sir Xu’s demeanor when he left?”

The little eunuch remembered Sir Xu’s instructions but feigned hesitation, as if recalling, before finally saying, “Sir Xu left the palace looking very troubled.”

To bolster his story, he added, “Usually, Sir Xu would chat a bit with me, full of cheer, but today he said not a word.”

Emperor Yuanjing waved his hand.

“You are dismissed,” the elderly eunuch immediately commanded.

After the little eunuch left, Emperor Yuanjing sat in silence for a long time before finally speaking, “Go and summon Lang’er from Jingxiu Palace.”

The elderly eunuch acknowledged the order and slowly withdrew from the bedchamber.

...

The elderly eunuch, accompanied by a squad of guards, walked through the palace walls, bathed in the waning light of the setting sun, arriving at Jingxiu Palace.

A eunuch stationed at the entrance recognized the elderly eunuch from a distance and hurried over, saying, “Please wait, I will inform Consort Chen...”

“We’re in a hurry.” The elderly eunuch slapped him aside and led the guards into the courtyard. As they approached the inner chambers, they could hear sobbing coming from inside.

Standing in the courtyard, the elderly eunuch called out loudly, “Consort Chen, this old servant requests an audience.”

From within Consort Chen's chambers, a palace maid with slightly red eyes stepped out and softly said, “The Consort invites you in.”

Following the maid, the elderly eunuch entered and found Consort Chen sitting in a large chair, clutching a silk handkerchief, occasionally dabbing at her eyes, her face filled with sorrow.

“What has happened, Madam?” the elderly eunuch asked, surprised.

“A servant girl by my side suddenly fell ill and passed away. The imperial physician couldn't save her,” Consort Chen replied sorrowfully.

“This...” The elderly eunuch tried to comfort her, “Madam must not be too saddened. What was the name of this maid?”

“Lang’er.”

“!!!” The elderly eunuch’s expression froze.

“And what brings you to Jingxiu Palace, Grand Eunuch?” Consort Chen asked softly.

With a forced smile, the elderly eunuch replied, “His Majesty sent me to offer his condolences to the Madam, knowing that you’ve been on edge lately.”

Turning her head away, Consort Chen said with a hint of grievance, “His Majesty cannot even come to see his concubine himself?”

The elderly eunuch chuckled awkwardly, avoiding any comment on the Consort’s complaint.

After a few more idle exchanges, he casually asked, “Wasn’t Lang’er still quite young?”

Though Lang’er was an old servant of Jingxiu Palace, it had been many years since Emperor Yuanjing had favoured any of the consorts, so the elderly eunuch had little impression of this maid who had passed so suddenly.

“A pitiful child,” Consort Chen said, her expression full of sorrow.

Taking his cue, the elderly eunuch offered, “May we take a look?”

As the manager of palace affairs, the elderly eunuch had authority over all eunuchs and maids within the palace, though this role was largely symbolic due to his duties as the Emperor’s closest attendant.

Bidding farewell to Consort Chen, he was led by a palace maid to the south wing, where Lang’er’s body lay. She appeared pale and lifeless on the bed.

“Did the imperial physician examine her?”

“Yes, Grand Eunuch, the physician said it was a brain ailment, beyond any cure.”

The elderly eunuch stared at Lang’er’s body for a long while before giving his orders. “Let us have the body.”

He instructed the guards to carry away Lang’er’s corpse and hurried back to report to the Emperor.

Upon returning to Emperor Yuanjing’s chambers, the old emperor was still seated behind his desk, covered in golden silk, his face expressionless as he stared at the entrance.

When the elderly eunuch crossed the threshold, the Emperor didn’t even react.

“Your Majesty, Lang’er is dead...” the elderly eunuch reported softly.

After what seemed an eternity, Emperor Yuanjing finally responded with a simple, “Hmm.” The emperor, who had reigned supreme for nearly half a century, displayed neither joy nor sorrow.

...

The next day, Emperor Yuanjing convened the court assembly once again. As the dim light of dawn spread, all civil and military officials entered the Meridian Gate in an orderly manner. Some remained in the square outside the Jinluan Hall, while others stood on the marble steps just outside.

Only a select few entered the hall itself—those referred to by storytellers as: “the noble lords atop the temple.”

Once the officials had gathered, Emperor Yuanjing appeared from behind the hall, a quarter of an hour later than the start of court, and took his seat on the dragon throne.

After the usual exchanges between the emperor and his ministers, the Minister of Justice stepped forward and announced loudly, “Your Majesty, the Three Judicial Offices have completed their investigation, and it has been confirmed that the Empress was indeed the mastermind behind the plot against Consort Fu.

“The Shangguan family is unworthy of their position. The Empress conspired to harm a consort and framed the Crown Prince. We urge Your Majesty to punish her severely.”

The Minister of the High Court immediately stepped forward in support.

Inside the hall, the civil officials, military officers, and certain noble families all voiced their agreement, their combined voices forming a unified chorus.

This signalled that they had already reached a consensus the day before. Deposing an empress is far less significant than deposing a crown prince, which concerns the foundation of the nation. Deposing the empress, however, is a personal matter of the emperor. As long as there is valid reasoning—proving that the Empress has indeed committed a serious offense and that it isn’t just a case of the emperor tiring of her—the ministers have no reason or need to oppose it.

The only thing at stake with deposing the Empress is the status of the Fourth Prince, as he is Emperor Yuanjing’s only legitimate son. Many have placed their hopes on him.

Those who did not voice their support belonged to the Fourth Prince’s clique.

Before Emperor Yuanjing could respond, Wei Yuan stepped forward, and the hall fell silent immediately.

"Your Majesty, there are deeper layers to the plot against Consort Fu. The Empress is not the mastermind. The true culprit is Huang Xiaorou, who murdered Consort Fu and tricked the Crown Prince into the Qingfeng Hall, staging this entire case."

No sooner had Wei Yuan finished speaking than a chief supervising secretary, a professional court critic, leaped forward to refute:

"Nonsense! How could a mere palace maid pull off such a massive conspiracy? And why would Huang Xiaorou frame the Crown Prince? Wei Yuan, do you take His Majesty and the dignitaries of this court for fools?"

As an afterthought, he added, "I urge Your Majesty to execute this scoundrel."

Other ministers joined in, denouncing Wei Yuan, and the hall descended into chaos.

The elderly eunuch cracked his whip, and a sharp "snap" echoed through the hall, silencing the uproar. "Silence!" he ordered.

The Minister of Justice and the Minister of the High Court sneered at Wei Yuan. The other officials also cast glances his way—some mocking, some scornful, and some expressing confusion or helplessness. The latter came from those in the Fourth Prince's clique.

Unperturbed by the criticisms or the Censor's insults, Wei Yuan continued, "Yesterday, the bronze gong leading the investigation into Consort Fu's case, Xu Qi'an, discovered that Huang Xiaorou had been pregnant before..."

Before he could finish, an uproar erupted once again in the hall.

A palace maid, Huang Xiaorou, had been pregnant?!

In the palace, the only men capable of impregnating a woman, aside from the emperor, were the guards. But that was highly unlikely, as only the most loyal and rigorously selected guards were assigned to the palace, often in groups that supervised one another. The idea of a guard secretly engaging in an affair with a palace maid was out of the question.

This left only one possibility...

Suddenly, the dignitaries began casting sidelong glances at Emperor Yuanjing, their expressions subtly shifting with meaning.

Emperor Yuanjing's stern face twitched slightly. He glared icily at Wei Yuan, who had deliberately paused mid-sentence, and said in a deep voice:

"Wei Yuan, continue!"

Wei Yuan spoke slowly, "After further investigation, it was discovered that the one who forced Huang Xiaorou into pregnancy was none other than the Imperial Uncle, Shangguan Ming..."

Wei Yuan proceeded to tell the court a carefully crafted story:

Palace maid Huang Xiaorou was violated by the Imperial Uncle, resulting in an unwanted pregnancy. After secretly undergoing an abortion, she harbored a deep grudge and silently waited for years before plotting her revenge. Using her position as a maid close to Consort Fu, she tampered with the railings of the observation tower. When the time was right, she tricked the Crown

Prince into Qingfeng Hall, setting in motion one of the most shocking conspiracies the harem had seen in over a decade.

Upon learning of the plot against Consort Fu and realizing that Huang Xiaorou was involved, the Imperial Uncle, fearing his vile actions would be exposed, sought refuge with the Empress. Only then did the Empress learn of the heinous acts her brother had committed. Out of familial love, she tearfully took responsibility for his crimes.

Finally, Wei Yuan summarized the case: "This is how the events unfolded. The Imperial Uncle has already confessed. Your Majesty may interrogate him at any time."

"Nonsense!" The Minister of the High Court snorted coldly, bowing to the emperor. "Your Majesty, according to what I know, Huang Xiaorou was murdered. If she were truly the mastermind, then where is the murderer?"

The ministers echoed his sentiments.

Without a change in his expression, Wei Yuan calmly explained, "Huang Xiaorou had accomplices who helped her carry out the plot, framing the Crown Prince and indirectly implicating the Empress."

Hearing this, many ministers were struck with a sudden realization, and they began to piece together their own theories.

Had it not been for the revelation about the Imperial Uncle's abuse of Huang Xiaorou, everyone would have assumed that the Empress had confessed because the evidence was irrefutable.

But now, with the Imperial Uncle's confession, the case had taken a sharp turn.

Whether the Empress was truly innocent or not remained to be seen, but with the Imperial Uncle's admission of guilt, there was now room for maneuvering.

The Fourth Prince's clique, which had been disheartened moments before, seized the opportunity and began speaking out in support of Wei Yuan, denouncing the Imperial Uncle.

Gradually, the hall was reduced to two voices—the Crown Prince's faction and the Fourth Prince's faction—engaged in a war of words. The Crown Prince's supporters were led by the Right Censor-in-Chief of the Censorate, while the Fourth Prince's supporters were composed of various smaller factions.

Among the larger factions, some might have secretly supported the Crown Prince, but they would never come forward openly. The biggest players always remain hidden beneath the surface.

After a fierce exchange, Wei Yuan called out loudly, "I ask Your Majesty to make a decision."

The bickering stopped, and the officials joined in, "We ask Your Majesty to make a decision."

Wei Yuan's memorial had already been submitted to the palace the previous day. Typically, when court matters are discussed, memorials are sent to the palace a day in advance. Emperor Yuanjing had thus already seen the Imperial Uncle's confession.

Today, if Emperor Yuanjing wished to conclude the matter of Consort Fu's case, he could settle it here and now. If not, he could order further investigation.

As the ministers ceased their arguments, Emperor Yuanjing finally spoke, his voice calm and deliberate: "Shangguan Ming has disturbed the harem and is sentenced to immediate execution. The Empress is equally guilty for failing to report the crime, but considering her familial loyalty, she will be confined to reflect on her actions for three months."

The ministers thought this was the end, but Emperor Yuanjing paused and continued, "The Crown Prince is guilty of drunkenly barging into Qingfeng Hall and failing to conduct himself properly. He will be confined to reflect on his actions for six months. Noble Consort Chen encouraged the Crown Prince's drinking, leading to this catastrophe. She shall be demoted and stripped of the 'Noble' title."

The hall fell into silence.

The ministers exchanged bewildered glances, unable to understand why the Empress was only confined for three months, while the Crown Prince for six. Moreover, Consort Chen, who seemed to have no direct involvement, was demoted from Noble consort to regular consort, a two-rank drop. [^1]

Could this case have something to do with Consort Chen...? The seasoned officials began to ponder.

...

Court was adjourned. Soon after, the elderly eunuch promptly went to Fengqi palace and Jingxiu Palace to deliver the imperial decree.

Upon hearing the news, the Empress collapsed over her desk, weeping bitterly.

As for Noble Consort Chen, she accepted the decree with a stiff face. The moment the elderly eunuch left, she swept everything off the table in a fit of rage, including the decree itself.

The sounds of crashing reverberated through the room as her heaving chest betrayed her fury. Her usually dignified oval face turned livid with anger.

Through gritted teeth, she spat, "Wei Yuan..."

Then, clenching her delicate fist, she spat out each word with utmost venom: "Xu Qi'an!"

By now, she had figured it out. The emperor's sudden shift in attitude was absolutely related to the events of the previous day.

Yesterday, the elderly eunuch had come by under the guise of offering some consolation. That alone wasn't unusual. But in light of today's changes in court, the hidden truth was easy to surmise.

The emperor was suspicious of her...

And the only person she'd ever exposed herself to was Xu Qi'an. It was clear now that this wretched little Bronze Gong had played some underhanded trick behind her back.

All her carefully laid plans had fallen apart because of a mere Bronze Gong.

A few minutes later, the crashing sounds resumed from the room, and the palace maids and attendants outside froze in fear.

...

The day after the conclusion of the Noble Consort Fu case, Xu Qi'an finally recovered his beloved mare.

This was a horse with a troubled destiny. After narrowly escaping death that day, it had run off in panic. As it galloped through the city, it was spotted by the *Yudao* City Guards patrolling the streets.

Seeing the branding on the horse's flank, the guards immediately recognized it as one of their own and brought it back to their garrison.

Indeed, this mare was a military horse used by the City Guards. Xu Qi'an's second uncle had obtained it through his connections at a discounted price. After owning it for only a few years, he had passed it on to his nephew.

Through some inquiries, the Nightwatchers were able to trace the horse back to the City Guards, leading to the recovery of Xu Qi'an's cherished mare.

That morning, Xu Qi'an was sitting with his family, having breakfast in the hall.

Little Pea had the day off from school and was ecstatic, thoroughly enjoying her breakfast.

"You act like you've struck gold just because you have one day off," Auntie remarked disdainfully. "I've never seen such a foolish daughter in my life."

"You've only had two daughters in your whole life," Second Uncle chimed in, standing up for his youngest daughter. But not wanting to openly quarrel with Auntie, he muttered his comeback under his breath.

"You dare say that? Lingyin's foolishness is entirely your doing," Auntie retorted, sticking to her old complaint that Second Uncle was to blame for Lingyin's slow development.

"But I just don't want to study," Lingyin said pitifully.

"Lingyin, you're not dumb. Don't listen to your mother," Xu Qi'an reassured her, patting her on the head as he recalled a method his teachers had taught him in his previous life.

"When you don't feel like studying, just imagine you've got two little people in your mind..."

"What?! There are people in my head?" Lingyin gasped, covering her head with her pudgy hands.

"...Just imagine," Xu Qi'an sighed, trying to keep calm. "One little person doesn't want to study, but the other one should insist, 'I love studying! I love studying!' Keep that up, and eventually, you'll start to enjoy it."

“Self-suggestion!” Xu Xinnian nodded approvingly. “That’s a good method. I used to do the same when I stayed up late reading. When I got sleepy, I’d convince myself that I wasn’t tired. It worked.”

Auntie’s attitude shifted immediately. With her own son vouching for the method, she now had hope for her daughter’s future. “Lingyin, try it!”

The simple-minded Lingyin tilted her head in deep thought before slowly nodding.

“Well? How did it go?” Auntie eagerly asked, clearly more concerned about her younger daughter.

“One little person says, ‘I don’t want to study, I don’t want to study.’ And the other one says, ‘Okay, okay!’”

Auntie sighed, covering her face in exasperation.

“Maybe studying just isn’t for her, Auntie. There’s no need to force it,” Xu Qi’an consoled.

“The spring exams are the day after tomorrow, right?” Second Uncle suddenly asked.

“Mm!” Xu Xinnian nodded confidently.

Auntie immediately peeled a boiled egg and placed it before her son. “With our Erlang’s knowledge, passing the imperial exams is a certainty. Our family’s moment of glory has finally arrived.”

Though Xu Qi’an had gained the favor of Wei Yuan and even established a connection with the princess, at the end of the day, he was still a martial artist.

In this era, where “all pursuits are inferior to the scholar’s path,” the true way to bring honour to one’s family was through academic success.

Even Xu Lingyue, who usually favoured her eldest brother, agreed with their mother’s perspective. She believed that the future of the Xu family rested on her second brother’s performance in the upcoming imperial exams.

“Second Brother, the future of the Xu family’s status as part of the scholar-official class rests on you,” Xu Lingyue said with a smile, offering Xu Xinnian a dish.

Xu Xinnian raised his chin proudly.

Xu Qi’an, however, couldn’t help but feel frustrated inside. _Why is the world so unfair? When will us martial men ever stand tall?_ Everywhere he went, he encountered disdain for martial artists. It made him want to sigh in exasperation.

His thoughts drifted to the conversation he’d had with Wei Yuan the other day. The martial system had been refined and passed down through generations, leading to the current nine ranks. But even now, the system hadn’t reached its peak.

The path to transcending the ranks remained unexplored.

This was why the martial arts system had yet to produce a Martial God.

“It doesn’t make sense,” he pondered. “So many people follow the path of martial cultivation. With such a large pool of talent, there should have been some genius who broke through, someone who became a Martial God after all these generations. Maybe it’s just too early to dwell on this. If I can reach the Fourth Rank in my lifetime, I’ll be more than happy.”

After breakfast, Second Uncle grabbed his helmet and strapped on his sword, ready to head out the door.

“Hold on, Second Uncle, you’re the elder of the family. You must stay home today,” Xu Qi’an called out to him.

Second Uncle looked back, confused. “Is it some kind of holiday today?”

Auntie shook her head.

Xu Lingyue and Xu Xinnian also looked at Xu Qi’an in bewilderment.

Xu Qi’an glanced at Auntie, then lifted his chin proudly. “It’s not a holiday, but it is the day that honour is brought to the Xu family name.”

Chapter 259. Leave the Capital

“Bring honour to the family?”

Auntie didn’t quite grasp the meaning at first, thinking that New Year’s top ranking in the imperial exams would take at least another month. But once her nephew revealed his smug expression, she realised he was boasting.

Auntie rolled her eyes and scoffed, “Oh my, has our dear first young master been given a noble title?”

One could tell from the tone alone that she was dripping with sarcasm.

“I’ve heard from the neighbours that only scholars can rise to high positions. No matter how much you get promoted, you’re still just a Nightwatcher.”

Although Auntie had gradually come to terms with things and wasn’t as resentful as before, she still held her ground on one point: her son was destined to be more successful than her nephew.

Unlike her husband Xu Pingzhi, who considered both his son and nephew to be equally important since they were raised in the same household for twenty years, Auntie saw a clear distinction. She could not stand the way Xu Qi’an would occasionally show off and parade around in front of her, so from her perspective, Second Brother had to outshine the First.

“You don’t believe me, Auntie?” Xu Qi’an raised an eyebrow.

“I believe you, it’s probably just a promotion,” Auntie responded dismissively.

Recently, Uncle Xu had also been promoted, transferred from patrolling the outer city to the inner city, gaining a fixed patrol area. The residents there were wealthy families who, in pursuit of peace and security, would bribe the city guard to maintain good relations.

Thus, Uncle Xu had been raking in extra cash, thus even if he had recently surrendered fifty taels of silver to Auntie, he still had money to throw at the Jiaofangsi.

Of course, Uncle Xu never initiated these visits—it was always because of social obligations. On the other hand, Dalang and Erlang, being of a certain age and unmarried, occasionally went to the Jiaofangsi for relief.

“It’s not just a promotion; it is a noble title!” Xu Qi’an said gravely.

Auntie couldn’t help but laugh, her delicate shoulders shaking with mirth.

“Oh, stop exaggerating,” Uncle Xu waved dismissively, “Back in the day, I fought at the frontlines of the Shanhai Pass, charging through battlefields from south to north and back again, drenched in blood. Even I didn’t get a title.”

From south to north and back again, doesn’t your arm get tired... Xu Qi’an mentally retorted.

Xu Xinnian shook his head, “Titles of nobility are a big deal. The last time someone was ennobled was twenty years ago during the battle of Shanhai Pass. In times of peace, where would you find the merits for such a thing?”

“Merit doesn’t always require battlefields.” Xu Qi’an patted Little Pea on the head, “Right, Lingyin?”

Little pea ignored him, her tiny mouth pressed against the bowl as she slurped her porridge.

“Oh, stop it. I know exactly how capable you are.” Auntie laughed scornfully, “If you’re not off today, you’d better head to the constabulary soon. You’re going to make your uncle late for his morning role call.

“As for bringing honour to the family, you don’t need to worry yourself with that. When our family gets an imperial scholar after the spring exams, then we’ll throw a great banquet to celebrate.”

The exams hadn’t even started, but Auntie was already bursting with pride.

Damn, this is exactly the kind of start I wanted. An uncle who plays favourites, an aunt who’s sharp-tongued, a cousin who looks down on me because he’s a scholar, one sister who disrespects me, and another who steals my food... and then, I return as a war god, get ennobled, and force them to live in a doghouse... Xu Qi’an mused, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction.

Uncle Xu picked up his helmet again, nodding: “It’s getting late, I need to get to the constabulary.”

As for the ennoblement, he had taken it to be Xu Qi’an joking around.

If the Xu family were to gain a noble, then even their ancestors’ tombs would be bursting with azure clouds. Only if Erlang would place top of his cohort and pass with flying colours, could he hope to gain the same reverence.

Just then, Uncle Xu noticed the housekeeper, Old Zhang, rushing towards them in a panic, as if something was chasing him.

“M-m-m-m-master...”

The housekeeper stammered, excited, “A decree from the Emperor!”

“A de-what?” Uncle Xu hadn’t heard clearly.

“A decree!”

“What -ree?” Second Brother asked, confused.

“A decree! A decree of enfeoffment!”

Xu Qi’an glanced at his dumbstruck Auntie, then nudged Uncle Xu towards the courtyard. “The Emperor’s decree is here.”

Yesterday, after the case of Consort Fu had been resolved, Wei Yuan had mentioned that the imperial decree for his ennoblement had already been drafted, and it was to be issued today.

Xu Pingzhi’s journey from the inner courtyard to the outer courtyard felt like a lifetime. His emotions were a whirlwind of anxiety, excitement, hesitation, and fear—similar to how he had felt on his wedding night.

In the distance, he saw a eunuch dressed in a serpent robe standing in the courtyard, flanked by armoured guards. The eunuch held an imperial edict embroidered with golden dragons in his hands.

Thump, thump, thump...

Xu Pingzhi could hear his own heart pounding like a drum.

As he approached, the eunuch slowly unfurled the edict and announced, “Bronze Gong Xu Qi’an, receive the decree.”

Uncle Xu was the first to kneel, dragging Xu Qi’an down with him. Uncle Xu shot him a glare—how could he kneel so reluctantly in front of an imperial decree?

“Bronze Gong Xu Qi’an, present.”

The eunuch nodded and read aloud, “By the grace of Heaven, the Emperor decrees... military leaders and brave generals are the pillars of the state... Xu Qi’an has solved multiple major cases, and at Yunzhou, he slew two hundred rebel soldiers...”

Two hundred rebels? Xu Qi’an was taken aback. *I killed thousands of them, didn’t I? How did it turn into two hundred?*

Then he realised he’d been exaggerating so much that he’d started to believe his own lies.

“...Thus, Xu Qi’an is hereby granted the title of Viscount of Changle, thirty acres of fertile land, and five hundred taels of gold. Thus decreed.”

“Long live the Emperor’s grace!”

Xu Qi’an shouted the ritual phrase, rising to accept the decree.

"Congratulations, Sir Xu... Oh, I mean, Viscount Xu." The eunuch in the serpent robe said with a smile.

"Thank you, milord," Xu Qi'an responded, taking the decree and simultaneously slipping a hundred-tael silver note into the eunuch's hand.

When the eunuch in the serpent robe left with his guards, Second Uncle snatched the imperial decree and stared at it for ages, flipping it over repeatedly, despite being barely literate.

As he looked and looked, Second Uncle's eyes reddened.

"We've been enfeoffed... We've been enfeoffed... The Xu family now has a viscount!"

He clutched the decree and rushed to the backyard, shouting, "Dearest, write to the relatives right away! Our family now has a viscount! We're throwing a grand banquet, one that will last three days and nights! Hahaha..."

Xu Qi'an hugged the chest of gold and land deeds bestowed by Emperor Yuanjing and sneaked back to his room.

Second Uncle is such a fool. What's a decree compared to gold?

...

After storing the gold in the Book of the Earth fragment, Xu Qi'an returned to the inner courtyard, where he saw Second Uncle and Erlang fighting over the imperial decree. The two nearly came to blows.

Erlang, annoyed, said, "Anyone who didn't know better would think the decree was meant for you, Father."

Second Uncle: "Get lost, get lost!"

Erlang, growing angry, said, "I just want to see how it's written."

Second Uncle: "Get lost, get lost!"

Erlang, furious now, said, "Father, give me a look at the decree!"

Second Uncle: "Get lost, get lost!"

Hmph, an uncultured warrior... Erlang flung his sleeves and stormed off to his study to read. What's a mere viscountship? He aimed to achieve the top scholar title, the *zhuangyuan*, otherwise, his elder brother would steal all the family's glory.

"Is it really true? Have we really been enfeoffed?" Auntie asked, her wide carslan-blue eyes staring at the document. Her mind hadn't quite processed the situation, and she felt as if she was in a dream.

"Of course it's true. There's the imperial seal on it, and His Majesty even bestowed 500 taels of gold and 30 acres of fertile land!" Xu Pingzhi boomed, as though afraid others wouldn't believe him.

Five hundred taels of gold and 30 acres of fertile land... Auntie's eyes sparkled gold.

"Dalang, is this true? Why does it feel like I'm dreaming?" Auntie grabbed Xu Qi'an's arm.

Xu Qi'an brushed her off, replying coolly, "Madam, no need to act so familiar. You should call me Viscount."

Xu Lingyue looked at her elder brother with adoring eyes.

After sufficiently annoying Auntie, Xu Qi'an pulled a land deed from his robe, slapped it on the table, and said, "I've stored the gold myself. As for these 30 acres of land, Auntie, since I'm still unmarried, I'll trouble Lingyue to manage it for me."

Auntie's hand froze mid-reach. There was nothing she could do about Xu Qi'an, so she stomped her foot in frustration and turned to Second Uncle for support, exclaiming, "Xu Pingzhi..."

Unable to deal with his nephew, Auntie had no choice but to direct her ire toward her husband.

Second Uncle chuckled, "Ningyan is teasing you. Lingyue doesn't know how to manage land."

Xu Lingyue softly interjected, "Father, I've studied for a few years, and I also know some arithmetic."

Besides, managing land typically required trustworthy household servants to handle the fieldwork, while the master only needed to handle the accounts.

Suddenly, Auntie felt a sense of crisis.

Her previous imaginary rivals had been the future wives of Dalang and Erlang. Only now did she realise that her real enemy was her own daughter, Xu Lingyue, who had the audacity to rise against her and compete for power in the household.

"Why are you looking at me like that, Mother?" Xu Lingyue felt uneasy under Auntie's burning gaze.

"I'm not looking at you; I'm looking at that ingrate."

"..." Xu Lingyue remained speechless.

...

As for the Stargazing Tower, the impression people in the capital—and throughout the Great Feng—had of it could be summed up in only one word: tall!

To those in the jianghu, beyond its towering height, the Stargazing Tower was also a forbidden place in Great Feng, for it housed the empire's sole first-rank powerhouse.

Few ever thought about what might lie beneath the tower.

Clang, clang, clang...

In the dim underground, an iron door slowly rose, revealing a winding stone staircase leading downward. Every ten steps, an oil lamp on the walls cast a dim glow.

Tap, tap, tap... The sound of footsteps echoed through the still air, growing clearer by the second as a shadowy figure ascended from below.

The figure's hair was disheveled, hiding their face, and they wore a simple hemp robe. Barefoot, they occasionally revealed a full chest as they walked, indicating the figure was a woman.

A woman with ample curves.

"I'm still a bit short of reaching the fourth rank as a formation master. Why has teacher summoned me...?" the shadowy figure muttered.

She glanced upward, where, at the top of the stairs, light poured down like a tide—a long-lost sunlight.

Emerging from the iron door, the figure stood silently in a hall, closed her eyes, and stretched her arms wide, embracing the sunlight.

She hadn't been outside in five years, ever since Jianzheng had confined her beneath the Stargazing Tower.

Walking through the corridor on the first floor, the disheveled woman ascended the stairs. As she reached the second floor, the sound of rapid footsteps came from above. A white-robed arcanist descended, carrying a tray filled with bottles and jars.

The two came face to face.

The arcanist froze, his complexion turning pale, as if he had just encountered something terrifying.

For a few seconds, he stood there, motionless. Then he turned and fled in panic.

The disheveled woman, in good faith, called out, "Junior Brother, slow down, be careful not to slip."

The moment her words left her lips, the arcanist lost his footing and tumbled down the stairs, crashing into her. Both of them rolled down together.

Bang, bang...

The bottles and jars in the tray shattered, releasing clouds of multicolored dust.

"Help... help..." The arcanist's face flushed, his skin gradually turning an ominous shade of black and blue. He clutched his throat, struggling to speak.

"This... this is... Senior Brother Song Qing's... poison..."

The woman clutched her own neck and struggled to reply, "Senior Sister didn't bring any antidote..."

"The antidote... is right there..." The arcanist, seemingly paralyzed, fixed his eyes on a shattered jar on the ground, staring intently at the spilled powder.

With the woman's help, the arcanist managed to ingest the antidote. He scrambled down the stairs, rushing into the main hall on the first floor, where several other white-robed arcanists were brewing and refining medicine. He shouted:

"Senior Sister Zhong is out!"

Clang... The arcanists dropped their porcelain bottles, spoons, and other tools.

Stiffly, they turned their heads, staring blankly in her direction.

The disheveled woman continued her ascent, passing the seventh floor. Just as she did, the alchemy room on that floor exploded with a "boom," shaking the floors and walls, causing dust to rain down.

"Why did it explode? Why did it explode?!" came Song Qing's angry roar.

Ignoring it, the woman pressed on, finally reaching the top of the Stargazing Tower, the Bagua Platform.

There, seated behind a desk, was Jianzheng, clad in white robes, his beard long and flowing, giving him the air of an immortal. He was lost in thought, staring at the distant horizon with a cup of wine in his hand.

"Teacher."

The woman greeted him respectfully, her gaze drifting toward the fine wine and delicacies on the table.

"Zhong Li, the opportunity for you to advance to the fourth rank has arrived," Jianzheng said softly. The woman's body trembled slightly, and she raised her head, revealing her sharp, snow-white chin.

...

The nobility of the Great Feng were split into five levels: Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, and Baron. Each rank is further subdivided into five grades (tiers)

Xu Qi'an's full title was the "Third Grade Viscount of Changle County."

This was a noble title that, while not at the top, was still respectable. It didn't come with much real power but did grant him a monthly stipend.

However, the significance of a noble title wasn't about authority; it lay in the honour it represented and the social status it conferred.

Passing the Imperial Exams and holding office is powerful, but that power is fleeting. The true, lasting distinction from commoners and entry into the noble class is a hereditary title.

Of course, Xu Qi'an's title was not hereditary, but as long as he held it, the Xu family was nobility and no longer commoners.

In the future, if the Viscount of Changle County were to marry a common woman as his main wife, officials in the palace would immediately submit memorials impeaching him. The ministers would say: "Is a princess not good enough? Are the noble ladies not beautiful enough?"

How could he marry a commoner as his wife?

In short, for the first time in hundreds of years, the Xu family had produced a Viscount, completely shedding their status as commoners and joining the ranks of the nobility.

For Xu Pingzhi, the head of the Xu family, this was probably *the* crowning moment of his life. He immediately took Xu Qi'an to pay respects at the ancestral tomb.

Upon their return, he planned to send out invitations and host a grand banquet, inviting family and friends to the manor for a celebratory feast.

But Auntie thought it inappropriate and said, "The imperial exam is the day after tomorrow. This will disrupt Erlang's studies."

Indeed, the day after tomorrow was the spring imperial exam — a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to leap into the ranks of the elite. Holding a grand banquet at home would certainly disrupt Erlang's

studies. Xu Pingzhi agreed that his wife made a valid point and decided to have Xu Erlang move to the old house outside the city to focus on his studies, while the banquet would continue as planned.

Xu Lingyin thought this was a great idea.

Xu Erlang cursed as he "left the live broadcast" and, with one servant and one maid, cheerfully moved back to the old house.

After returning from the ancestral tomb, Xu Qi'an generously allocated seventy taels of silver for the expenses of tomorrow's banquet.

Seventy taels was an enormous sum — it's the equivalent of a moderately well-off family's savings from three years of living frugally; two years' worth of brothel visits; or Xu Qi'an's salary for an entire year.

"I've been back for a while and still haven't visited Master Hengyuan's Welfare Hall. I should donate some money to help the needy..."

Xu Qi'an rummaged through a square cabinet and pulled out five cash of silver, intending to visit Hengyuan to see if he could get some free physical training techniques on the side.

Suddenly, a deep, distant voice echoed in his mind — it was the voice of the monk Shenshu: "Leave the capital."

Leave the capital?!

What does that mean.... Xu Qi'an's expression turned serious. Shenshu never initiated communication and usually remained dormant within him.

But now, he was telling him to leave the capital.

Is something going to happen in the capital, or is something going to happen to me?

As these thoughts flashed through his mind, Xu Qi'an's vision changed, and he found himself looking into a misty, grey world. The fog thinned, revealing a dilapidated temple, where Shenshu, with his clear, gentle features, sat cross-legged at the entrance.

This mysterious monk, hands clasped in meditation, gazed at Xu Qi'an with warm brown eyes and spoke in that distant voice: "Leave the capital."

Chapter 260. Master of Prophecy

After Xu Qi'an resurrected in Yunzhou, performed great merit, and was enfeoffed, his relationship with Lin'an and Huaqing saw a huge leap.

As for the Nightwatchers, Wei Yuan had promised to promote him to Silver Gong. No matter in status, money, or relationships, his future was seemingly boundless.

I can predict, in a few years time, I'll be a duke, marry a princess, and reach the peak of human life... it's definitely possible.

The capital has always been prosperous since the times of antiquity. Its resources were abundant, its healthcare, social care, and quality of life were all much more advanced than anywhere else. People liked big bustling cities, and Xu Qi'an was no exception.

Long ago, he had also wandered north for a while.[^1]

And it was not as if he couldn't leave, but he didn't want to.

Master, you're really not making things easy for me... Xu Qi'an frowned, asking: "Master, why must we leave the capital?"

The monk Shenshu tilted his head, looking into the distance: "I can feel that the western sect is coming."

The western sect?

Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned before realising that Shenshu was referring to the Buddhist sect from the Western Regions.

That's right, back during the Sangbo case, when the monk Panshu of Qinglong Temple learned that Master Shenshu had escaped, he immediately left the temple and headed west... *So, the Buddhist sect has come to seek justice?*

No wonder Shenshu is telling me to leave the capital. If the big bald monks from the West find out that Shenshu is inside me, I might really end up being trapped under a mountain for five hundred years.

And unlike the Monkey King, I don't have a massive and indestructible staff to defend myself. I wouldn't even have the chance to resist.

"So you're asking me to temporarily leave the capital?" Xu Qi'an's face showed some concern.

Shenshu slowly nodded.

"Alright, we're in this together now. By the way, Master, I've heard that the Buddhist sect has mystical body-refining techniques, ones that allow you to attain an indestructible body without the need for hard training. Could you teach me some?"

Gotta grab any benefits I can first.

Shenshu shook his head. "I am but a remnant soul."

Whether you're a remnant soul or not, I only know that you want to freeload off me for free... Xu Qi'an's lips twitched slightly.

A thin mist closed in, enveloping the dilapidated temple, and then gradually faded away... Xu Qi'an opened his eyes, finding himself back in his room, still sitting by the bed in the same posture.

It's easy to guess: the Western Buddhist sect has come for Shenshu. It's been more than a month now, and they'll at most review the case records and understand the sequence of events. They won't stay in the capital for long.

That means leaving the capital is only temporary, and I might not even need to stay away for too long.

Xu Qi'an nodded slightly to himself. In that case, he could accept it. He could treat it like a vacation, a chance to rest, and spend a few days living the mundane yet wealthy life in some prosperous city.

The tricky part is getting a leave of absence. Leaving the capital for no reason isn't allowed under the office regulations. Besides, Wei Yuan won't be able to manage without me.

If I just say, "The world is so vast, I want to explore it," it'll definitely get rejected. Old Wei doesn't understand my jokes.

Oh, right. I could discuss this with Daoist Jinlian, and have him come up with some excuse, like saying that someone in the Earth Book group chat is in trouble and needs my help...

Xu Qi'an planned to consult Daoist Jinlian, telling him that he wanted to leave the capital for a while but that the Nightwatchers' office had strict rules preventing casual leave. Mainly, he needed a valid excuse for Wei Yuan.

However, before that, he still had some matters to wrap up — attending tomorrow's banquet, instructing the prison guards to keep an eye on that couple, and whether Xu Erlang could stay in the capital after the imperial exams depended on them.

And then there was the matter of probing Wei Yuan about how he planned to retaliate against Noble Consort Chen.

Though the Consort Fu case had concluded, the enmity had been established. Wei Yuan would undoubtedly take further action to investigate the forces behind Noble Consort Chen.

The Empress, having lost her only brother, was unlikely to maintain her passive stance. The imperial harem was bound to become embroiled in a fierce struggle among the women.

Xu Qi'an was curious about how intense their conflict would get. He didn't want to return to the capital only to find that either Noble Consort Chen or the Empress had perished.

If that were the case, Lin'an and Huaiqing would surely become mortal enemies, and there would be no chance of them remaining sisters.

His dream of a carefree, romantic life with the two of them at Daming Lake would be thoroughly shattered.

Just then, a servant came to the door and called, "Master Xu, Lady Caiwei from the Sitianjian is here to visit."

What is she here for?

Xu Qi'an replied, "Got it. Have Auntie entertain her for now. I'll be there shortly."

He tucked his diary, silver, and other personal items into the Earth Book fragment in preparation for leaving the capital. After confirming that nothing important was left behind, he breathed a sigh of relief and went out to meet Chu Caiwei.

...

In the living room, Chu Caiwei was rapidly stuffing pieces of water chestnut cake into her mouth. Her ravenous eating looked as if someone were fighting her for the food...

In fact, someone was fighting her for the food. Sitting opposite her was Xu Lingyin, also holding a piece of water chestnut cake in each hand, stuffing her mouth just as quickly, trying to out-eat Chu Caiwei.

Between the two were seven or eight kinds of snacks, richly varied and plentiful in quantity.

Chu Caiwei had brought a large bag of food to the Xu residence today, eating while waiting for Xu Qi'an. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a little girl appeared, staring at her with wide, eager eyes.

The big-eyed beauty remembered her — Xu Ningyan's little sister, a child who could eat a lot and was always craving food.

"Take whatever you like. Big sister has plenty here..."

Chu Caiwei remembered saying that.

At first, the two foodies coexisted peacefully: you eat yours, I eat mine, both enjoying the snacks together in harmony. But as they ate, Chu Caiwei suddenly noticed, this little girl is eating faster than me.

No way, that's not fair! I need to eat faster, too.

Seeing this, Xu Lingyin thought, This big sister suddenly started eating faster, she's obviously trying to take more than me! No way, that's not fair! I need to eat even faster!

Without a word exchanged, the food war between them had quickly escalated into an intense battle.

The start to the peak of this war could be summed up in two syllables: _Ora ora ora ora ora ora..._

When Xu Qi'an entered the hall and saw this scene, he was stunned.

"Hey, hey, hey, you can't eat like that."

Xu Qi'an glanced at Little Pea's now round belly and lifted her aside, looking around. "Where's Auntie?"

Auntie wasn't in the hall, likely busy preparing for tomorrow's banquet. Otherwise, she would never let Little Pea eat like this.

"Big brother, big brother, this water chestnut cake is so delicious..." Xu Lingyin struggled, clearly anxious, as the big sister on the other side had already snatched several more pieces in just a few moments.

"It's not going to kill you."

Xu Qi'an pointed at the pastries on the table and said irritably, "Quick, pack them up... Miss Caiwei, what brings you here?"

He suspected that Chu Caiwei had come to play. Ever since his resurrection, he had been busy investigating the Consort Fu case, and it had been almost ten days since they last met.

Considering my current peak-level charm, it's no surprise she's still thinking about my good looks... Xu Qi'an chuckled to himself.

"My teacher asked me to invite you to Stargazing Tower," Chu Caiwei said as she took a sip of tea and began repacking the remaining pastries into a small deerskin pouch at her waist.

The Jianzheng is inviting me to the Stargazing Tower... Xu Qi'an frowned inwardly, but he didn't resist the idea too much.

He couldn't figure out what level the Jianzheng was on, but the Jianzheng certainly knew exactly where he stood.

The two of them left the Xu residence together, each riding a horse toward the Stargazing Tower.

"Those pastries were bought for me by Fifth Senior Sister, but your little sister ate more than half," Chu Caiwei said, holding the reins and looking ahead as she spoke with a playful and girlish tone.

"Xu Ningyan, you owe me money."

"Talking about money hurts feelings. The relationship between us can't be measured by silver."

Xu Qi'an lightly squeezed his horse's belly and said, "Let's not keep Sir Jianzheng waiting. Hiyah, hiyah..."

He urged the horse to run faster.

When they arrived at the Sitianjian, Xu Qi'an acted as though the matter of the pastries had never happened, not waiting for Chu Caiwei as he casually entered the building.

"Huh, why is the Sitianjian so empty today?"

The first floor's main hall was practically deserted, with only a few physicians on duty. Their expressions were odd, and they occasionally glanced toward the staircase as if afraid some sort of monster might come down.

Hearing Xu Qi'an's comment, a physician at the door dressed in white replied, "Master Xu, they've all gone to the surgery for consultations."

"What's special about today?" Xu Qi'an asked.

The physician awkwardly smiled but didn't answer.

Xu Qi'an, still puzzled, made his way upstairs. By the time he reached the seventh floor, he noticed that the alchemy room had been blown up. Normally teeming with activity, not a single alchemist was in sight.

He reached the Bagua Platform smoothly.

The first thing he saw was the Jianzheng's back — dressed in white, his white hair hanging down, sitting on the edge of the platform, facing outward.

Then, he noticed a disheveled woman sitting beside the Jianzheng, wearing a simple hemp cloth robe, hunched over as she ate and drank.

The reason he could tell she was a woman was that a man wouldn't have such a curvaceous figure, even when hunched over.

"Greetings to the Jianzheng!"

Xu Qi'an stopped a fair distance away and cupped his fists in salute.

"Not bad, your fundamentals are very solid," the Jianzheng remarked.

At that moment, footsteps echoed from the staircase as Chu Caiwei, her skirt fluttering, came up carrying several bags of pastries.

She placed the pastries on the table and pushed them toward the woman who was hunched over and eating. The woman glanced over and said, "So little?"

"They were eaten by a foolish little child," Chu Caiwei deflected the blame onto Xu Lingyin.

The woman nodded and resumed eating.

Fifth Senior Sister?

At this moment, Xu Qi'an finally understood and recalled a previous conversation with Wei Yuan.

The Jianzheng had five disciples. The fifth disciple was often in seclusion, and those unfamiliar with the Sitianjian assumed that Chu Caiwei was the only female disciple there.

"So it's her..." Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

Just then, the Jianzheng's deep voice rang out, "How is that sabre working out for you?"

"Very well. Thank you, Sir Jianzheng," Xu Qi'an replied respectfully.

At the same time, he grumbled inwardly: *That saber was practically tailor-made for my One Blade From Heaven and Earth. Isn't this all part of your plan? Why bother with the small talk?*

"How did the Rebirth Pill work?" the Jianzheng asked again.

"It worked extremely well," Xu Qi'an responded carefully, "except for the fact that my change in appearance has caused me some trouble. I'm not as low-key as I was when I looked refined and gentle."

"Is that so..." the Jianzheng nodded and smiled. "I could restore you to your original appearance."

Huh? I can even change back? Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned but quickly waved his hands. "I wouldn't dare trouble you, Sir Jianzheng."

To be honest, being a naturally handsome man feels more fitting for my current persona!

In front of the Jianzheng, he didn't dare make any lewd jokes, so he just joked inwardly to himself.

The Jianzheng slowly nodded and said, "Zhongli is my fifth disciple, a fifth-rank Master of Prophecy. She will accompany you for some time during your training."

Chu Caiwei was taken aback. She glanced at the Jianzheng, then turned to look at Xu Qi'an.

So a fifth-rank Arcanist is called a Master of Prophecy... But why must she follow me during my training? Xu Qi'an cautiously asked, "May I know the reason for this arrangement?"

The Jianzheng didn't answer his question but called out, "Zhongli."

The woman in the linen robe stood up and saluted Xu Qi'an. "Teacher said my luck isn't good, but if I follow you, my misfortune will decrease to some extent. You are my opportunity."

Her voice was quite pleasant and sweet.

Xu Qi'an stared intently at her face, but she kept her head slightly lowered, her messy, thick hair completely covering her features.

"Misfortune?" he asked in return.

Zhongli paused for a moment before sincerely replying, "Masters of Prophecy can peer into the workings of the heavens, but they suffer the backlash of the Heavenly Dao, becoming entangled in misfortune. Only by surviving 3,600 tribulations can one advance. If they can't endure, they perish, body and soul destroyed."

"Those who can withstand the backlash of the Heavenly Dao are all people of great fortune."

Upon hearing Zhongli's explanation, the first thing Xu Qi'an thought of were two things. First, he finally understood why there were so many sixth-rank Alchemists in the Sitianjian, but above sixth rank, he had only ever met one—Yang Qianhuan.

The second thing was that even that master of posturing was someone with great fortune. Unbelievable, truly unbelievable.

Masters of Prophecy can peer into the workings of the heavens? Hmm, this must be the prerequisite profession for a Master of Fate... Xu Qi'an, curious, asked, "In what form does this 'backlash' appear? I need to evaluate how dangerous this so-called backlash is, given that I'm just an ordinary Bronze Gong."

He had guessed correctly that the Jianzheng knew about the strange luck he carried.

Zhongli thought for a moment and then said, "Disaster follows words. Sometimes an unintentional comment of mine turns into a tangible catastrophe, affecting those around me, including myself.

"Sometimes a casual action also invites unforeseen disaster. The scale of the disaster is uncontrollable; it could be something as simple as taking a step backward that leads to a life-threatening calamity."

As she spoke, she symbolically took a half-step back.

And with that simple motion, an accident occurred. The dignified fifth-rank expert suddenly slipped, tumbling off the edge of the Bagua Platform, falling, falling...

"Someone save her!!"

Xu Qi'an's expression changed dramatically as he instinctively shouted.

The Stargazing Tower stood a hundred meters tall. A fall from such a height would be fatal, even for Xu Qi'an himself, if he hadn't reached the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones level. As for Arcanists, their physical bodies were relatively weak, far inferior to martial artists.

At the same time, a line from a song popped into Xu Qi'an's mind uncontrollably:

Was your half-step back really necessary? Such a small action, but it caused so much harm...

The Jianzheng sighed and extended his hand from under his wide sleeve, gently catching Zhongli in mid-air.

Zhongli was lifted back up, spared from falling to her death.

She kept her head down, her black hair hanging loose, and her voice was calm as she said, "Actually, if I had been prepared, even jumping from the Stargazing Tower wouldn't have hurt me. But just now, for some reason, my mind went blank, and I had no thought of saving myself..."

"Also, if someone else tries to help me resolve my misfortune, it won't work. I have to personally endure the trial."

So, I'm the one with good fortune who has to help you minimise your bad luck... Xu Qi'an suddenly understood the real reason the Jianzheng had called him here.

"Sorry."

Xu Qi'an shook his head and refused, "I'm about to leave the capital for important matters. It's not convenient for me to bring someone along."

Suddenly, a cup of wine flew toward him through the air.

As Xu Qi'an reached out to catch it, he heard the Jianzheng's voice in his ear, "Drink it, and you won't need to leave the capital."

The Jianzheng knows why I want to leave the capital? He really does know that Monk Shenshu is inside me... This wine seems ordinary enough, but what does he plan to do for me... Xu Qi'an drank the wine, forming a hypothesis.

It's to block the prying of fate!

A classic skill of the Arcanists.

...

In Yunzhou, far from the capital, outside the military camp of Baidi City.

Inside the Flying Swallow Army's tent, Li Miaozhen removed her light armor and set aside her silver spear, changing into the Taoist robe of the Heavenly Sect. She looked just as she did when she first descended the mountain.

The paper effigy Susu directed a group of ghosts, helping to pack her belongings.