

## Nightwatcher 261

### Chapter 261. Guessing Topics

"Master, everything has been packed," said Susu in a sweet voice. She wore a white, intricately layered dress, her makeup flawless, looking as stunning as ever.

Li Miaozen nodded slightly, opening the satchel tied to her waist. A whirlpool-like suction emerged, pulling in the dozen or so ghosts inside the tent.

"It's such a pity that you still haven't broken through to the fourth rank," Susu sighed and continued, "Otherwise, with the skills of a disciple from the Human Sect, no one would be your match."

"The Nascent Soul isn't so easily attained," Li Miaozen replied with a helpless sigh.

She had been stuck at the Golden Core stage for two full years.

The bandit problem in Yunzhou had been dealt with, thanks to Li Miaozen working alongside the local army and two Gold Gongs to raze the largest bandit camps and eliminate dozens of smaller ones.

Of course, banditry in Yunzhou was like a parasite that had infested this land for hundreds of years. It couldn't be wiped out entirely. In a few years, the remnants would likely revive, sprouting new roots.

But the current outcome was the best the local army could achieve. Yunzhou would enjoy a few years of peace, and Li Miaozen was satisfied with that.

Now, she had to move on to her own mission—the struggle between Haven and Man!

Every sixty years, the Heaven Sect and Human Sect held a great debate. Before the main event, the outstanding young disciples of both sects would engage in confrontations to set the stage for the contest.

Li Miaozen was one of the most exceptional disciples of the Heaven Sect in her generation. Another was her senior brother, also a member of the Heaven and Earth Society, who held the Number Seven fragment of the Earth Book.

However, that guy was currently in the northeast, and had whored his way off the radar.

"It's a shame that annoying bastard is dead, or he could've helped me investigate the Su family's massacre," Susu suddenly said.

Li Miaozen looked at the charming demon who had grown up with her, feeling a slight pang. In truth, Susu's family was not in the capital, and even if that man had wanted to investigate, he couldn't have left the capital to track down such an old case from so far away.

Susu understood this too, but she often brought it up. It wasn't really about the massacre; she was lamenting the loss of that shameless man.

\_That's why one must detach from emotions...\_ Li Miaozen sighed internally.

When loved ones pass, grief is overwhelming. When lovers' hearts change, resentment lingers... The seven emotions and six desires of the human world are like a raging fire. No wonder they say deep affection leads to short lives.

Only by being emotionless can one last forever.

Leaving the tent with Susu, Li Miaozen saw the four hundred soldiers of the Flying Swallow Army assembled in the square, waiting quietly.

All four hundred soldiers were removing their armor.

Li Miaozen slowly surveyed them. Some were changing into casual clothes, others into coarse cloth outfits, some looked like wealthy merchants, while others appeared as ragged as beggars... this was their true, original appearance.

The Flying Swallow Army was a ragtag group, its members from all walks of life—beggars, wandering martial artists, and chivalrous thieves who robbed from the rich and gave to the poor.

They had all gathered in Yunzhou for one reason: the heroine, Lady Flying Swallow.

Now that Li Miaozen was leaving, this army would naturally disband as well.

After the bandit suppression, Yang Chuannan had privately approached Li Miaozen, hoping to incorporate the Flying Swallow Army into the regular forces and turn it into Yunzhou's elite troops. He asked her to convince them to stay.

But not a single one wanted to remain.

"For over a year, we fought side by side, rooting out hundreds of bandit camps and killing thousands of bandits. Wherever we went, the common people could live in peace, without fear. Wherever we went, merchants could trade and provide for their families. Wherever we went, the light of justice shone...

"I, Li Miaozen, am deeply grateful to all of you brothers for sticking by my side. But, as they say, all good things must come to an end. The journey in Yunzhou is over, and I will continue forward, while you should return home to reunite with your families and friends.

"Life's path is long, filled with ups and downs, joys and sorrows. I hope you all remember our time in Yunzhou and never forget why we set out on this journey."

At this, Li Miaozen looked at the four hundred soldiers and clasped her fists, her voice strong and clear: "Do good, don't worry about the future."

The four hundred soldiers returned the gesture, their voices rising like a tidal wave:

"Do good, don't worry about the future."

This was the Lady Flying Swallow they were willing to follow and serve.

...

In the southern marches.

The shaman "Gu tribe" clans, often called barbarians, was not so named because they ate raw meat or drank blood, but because they lived in harmony with \*Gu\* insects, with their cultivation system and lifestyle revolving around these creatures.

Only through such a bond could they raise and nurture Gu, becoming one with them.

In more precise terms, the shaman clans followed a "Gu-centric" way of life, which is why their level of civilization lagged behind the "human-centric" Great Feng, the Western Regions, and the north-eastern kingdoms.

The gap was visible in all aspects, most notably in culture and architecture.

The shaman clans still used ancient hieroglyphs and lived in mud and thatched houses. Their vases and crafts were made from pottery rather than precious stones.

However, their clothing was not much different from that of the people of the Great Feng. The shaman clans was skilled at cultivating silkworms, producing silk that was several times higher in quality than that up north's.

But they weren't good at weaving, so merchants from the Great Feng often bought their high-quality silk at low prices or traded it for ready-made cloth.

High mountains stretched for hundreds of li, their riches plenty.

The mountains were filled with wild game and herbs, and the plains below were fertile, crisscrossed with rivers. The main settlement of the Strength Gu Tribe was here.

The Strength Gu Tribe cultivated thousands of acres of land on these plains. Some tribe members farmed, while others hunted, bartering their goods and living in prosperity.

Mosang returned from a hunt with a team of young men, carrying a horned bow. Some bore heavy wild boars weighing hundreds of pounds, while others carried brightly coloured pheasants. They were returning triumphantly.

As he approached the fields at the foot of the mountain, Mosang spotted his sister Lina, picking vegetables with the women.

Lina wore a simple cloth dress, her long, slender legs exposed. The southern border's hot climate made the Great Feng's long skirts and sleeves impractical here, so the shaman clans had adapted their clothing by cutting and modifying it.

The hem of her skirt barely reached her knees, and her sleeves were shortened to her elbows.

"Lina!" Mosang called out. When his sister looked up, he continued, "The Heaven Gu Grandma sent a message yesterday by snowhawk, asking you to visit her today. Why are you still dawdling here?"

Lina froze for a moment, then slapped her forehead, "Oh no, I forgot! Mosang, why didn't you remind me earlier?"

The men behind Mosang burst into laughter, and the women in the fields joined in.

The air was filled with joyous laughter, but Mosang felt a bit embarrassed. He turned and scolded the men, "What are you laughing at?"

Meanwhile, Lina, wearing soft cloth shoes, washed her hands by the stream and prepared to head to the Heaven Gu tribe, a hundred miles away.

Seeing her leave, Mosang called out, "The Heaven Gu tribe's dam has a breach. Make sure you help fix it."

"Got it!" Lina responded brightly as she ran off.

...

Compared to the Strength Gu tribe, the Heaven Gu tribe resembled more like a county seat from the Great Feng. Although somewhat simple, they had moved beyond grass huts, building mostly with yellow clay and tile houses.

The Heaven Gu tribe was situated at the foot of Mount Luoxia, with terraced fields rising in layers from the foot to the mountainside. There was a dam on the mountain, which suddenly burst yesterday, washing away the terraces.

Having often played in various tribes during her youth, Lina climbed Mount Luoxia with ease. After trekking for a while, she saw the collapsed dam.

She also saw dozens of members of the Heaven Gu tribe standing at the edge of the reservoir, led by the white-haired Heaven Gu Grandma.

Lina's gaze swept past them toward the reservoir, where the body of a strange creature floated on the water. The monster was over a hundred feet long, its body covered in black scales, with a pointed head, a thin, long neck, and webbed claws.

The Heaven Gu Grandma noticed Lina and waved her over.

Lina lightly leaped between the rocks and approached the Heaven Gu Grandma, speaking in a sweet voice, "Granny, what kind of monster is that?"

"A wyrm!"

The Heaven Gu Grandma smiled kindly. "I don't know where it came from, but it destroyed the dam, and the rice seedlings we just planted have all been washed away."

"Oh."

It was Lina's first time seeing a wyrm, though she had heard of them before. These monsters lived in the densely intertwined waterways of Southern marches, frequently traveling along underground rivers.

It was said that one of Lina's uncles was eaten by a wyrm while swimming.

"Help gather some stones, so we can patch the breach as soon as possible," the Heaven Gu Grandma said.

"Got it!"

Lina was best at hard labour. She immediately ran off, and within less than a moment, the others heard a dull thudding sound. Following the sound, they saw a "stone mountain" slowly moving.

This stone mountain stood over sixty metres tall, enough to cause towering waves if thrown into the reservoir.

The mountain wasn't moving on its own but was being carried by Lina, who looked as small as an ant in comparison.

The people of the Heaven Gu tribe remained unfazed, as if used to such a sight.

Among the seven tribes of the shaman clans, the Strength Gu tribe was renowned for their immense strength. Lina's father, Longtu, was the real mountain mover. During the war with the Great Feng years ago, he once threw a mountain at the enemy army, crushing thousands.

The giant rock slowly made its way to the dam, and with a loud boom, Lina set it down.

The onlookers atop the dam looked down and saw Lina steady herself, sinking into a horse stance. After a few moments of preparation, she suddenly let out a shout and punched the surface of the massive rock.

With a cracking sound, spiderweb-like cracks spread across the surface of the rock, quickly expanding. In an instant, it shattered into smaller pieces.

Now, there was plenty of material to repair the dam. The tribe members no longer needed to collect stones, saving a lot of time and effort.

Leaving the tribe members to repair the dam, the Heaven Gu Grandma led Lina down the mountain, returning to her residence, a four-sided courtyard with a skywell in the center.

Grandma's daughter-in-law was in the courtyard, drying the corpses of Gu insects for use as medicine. Her son was in the backyard raising Gu.

The Heaven Gu Grandma took Lina straight into the house, retrieving a wooden box from a cabinet. With a "click," the box opened, revealing a jade-like insect resembling a scorpion, with six segmented legs and two black eyes on its head, giving it a somewhat cute appearance.

"This is the Sevenfold Gu granny's husband refined. Before he passed, it was only half-complete. Granny has spent twenty years finishing it," she said, pushing the box toward Lina. "Now, I'll entrust it to you."

"For me?" Lina was surprised.

"Not for you, but for you to keep safe. One day, you'll give it to someone destined to have it."

A series of question marks flashed through Lina's mind.

She didn't understand how things had taken this turn, where she was suddenly given the Sevenfold Gu and tasked with passing it on to some "fated" person.

The Heaven Gu Grandma closed the box and said, "Do you remember the story I told you about those two thieves?"

Lina nodded vigorously. "I remember."

She also thought of Number Three. Speaking of which, Number Three hadn't sent any messages in a long time, and the Earth Book chat group had returned to its previous quiet state.

"There's a legend in the Heaven Gu tribe," the Heaven Gu Grandma continued. "On the day the Gu God awakens, all of the Southern Marches, even the rest of Jiuzhou, will be turned into a world of Gu. Although our shaman clans survive by raising and refining Gu, Gu are just tools. We are still human."

Her eyes reflected a complex emotion. “This isn’t just a legend; it’s the result of generations of prophecy from the Heaven Gu tribe. Many of our predecessors suffered heavenly backlash trying to glimpse this future.

“To prevent the Gu God from ever awakening, your grandpa came up with an idea twenty years ago. He set off to steal something that could suppress the Gu God, ensuring it would stay asleep for eternity.

“So, he left the Southern Marches and was never heard from again. Not long after, the life Gu he left behind with the tribe withered, and I knew he had died.”

“What was he trying to steal?” Lina asked, holding the wooden box, her ocean-blue eyes sparkling with curiosity.

The Heaven Gu Grandma shook her head and patted Lina’s hand gently. “Granny’s too old to withstand the backlash of revealing heavenly secrets.”

That’s why they say the workings of heaven cannot be divulged.

“Last night, I glimpsed a change in fate. That item is about to resurface, and Lina, you are connected to it,” the Heaven Gu Grandma said, her gaze intense.

“Me?”

Lina blinked her blue eyes, unable to comprehend how a child as ordinary as herself could be part of Granny’s “story.”

“Go to the capital. Your cultivation is strong enough, but you lack experience. This is the perfect opportunity to journey into the world of men,” the Heaven Gu Grandma said, adding, “I’ve discussed this with your father. He agrees.”

\*Go to the capital…\* Lina looked down at the wooden box in her hands, realizing she wasn’t too opposed to the idea. The first people who came to her mind were Number Three, Number One, and Daoist Jinlian.

...

Noon. Warm sunlight bathed the sky, and the Xu Residence was filled with laughter and joy.

Tables of banquet food were set up in the courtyard. To the left sat the Xu family members, while to the right were Xu Pingzhi and Xu Qi'an’s colleagues and old friends.

Among the guests were the county magistrate of Changle County, the bailiffs of the constabulary, and of course, the head constable, Lyu Qing.

Unfortunately, Li Yuchun, Song Tingfeng, and the others were stationed in Yunzhou and could not attend the banquet.

Xu Pingzhi and Xu Qi'an moved from table to table, offering toasts. Xu Qi'an had intended to just go through the motions, but hearing everyone congratulating him and calling him “Viscount,” he suddenly found himself enjoying the attention.

At the magistrate Zhu's table, the portly official lamented, "I have a niece, eighteen years of age, and quite the beauty. I was planning to match her with Ningyan, but it seems that's no longer possible."

Magistrate Zhu's daughter was already married, or else she might have been a suitable match for Xu Qi'an. As for the niece, her status simply wasn't high enough.

Head Constable Wang laughed and chimed in, "Now that Ningyan is a viscount, only a lady from a prominent family or the daughter of a wealthy household would be a fitting match."

Everyone laughed heartily.

Sitting at the neighboring table, Lyu Qing overheard this conversation and couldn't help but feel dejected.

Initially, with her position as the head constable of the county office, she would have been more than qualified to marry a Nightwatcher. After all, they were in the same profession—what a perfect match. But now that Xu Qi'an had been enfeoffed, entering the ranks of the nobility, it would no longer be proper for him to take a female constable as his wife—it would be a violation of protocol.

The banquet continued until around 1:30 p.m., when the guests finally began to leave. Xu Qi'an and Second Uncle Xu helped see the guests off, while Auntie directed the servants in cleaning up the aftermath.

By the 3:45 in the afternoon, Xu Erlang returned home with the servants and maids.

Auntie, being the attentive mother she was, instructed the cook to heat up some leftovers for her second son.

"Eat well and get plenty of rest, Erlang. You need to be up early tomorrow for the exams," Auntie said, diligently placing more food on his plate.

Though it wasn't quite time for dinner yet, Xu Erlang had to eat early and rest up, as a lack of sleep could affect his performance in the exams the following day.

Xu Qi'an, sitting nearby and sipping tea, suddenly spoke up, "Erlang, what topics will they test in the exams?"

Between bites of food, Xu Erlang answered simply, "Policy questions, classical texts, and poetry."

After a pause, he added, "Since the time of the late emperor, poetry was removed from the civil service exams. But in the eleventh year of Yuanjing's reign, thanks to Wang Zhenwen's push after entering the cabinet, poetry was reinstated."

During the two hundred years of the Confucian orthodox debates, poetry had declined to the point of being considered for removal from the syllabus.

"If you were to take the exams, big brother, there's no doubt you'd revive the poetry scene," Xu Erlang remarked with admiration as he sipped some wine. Then, turning to his father, he added wistfully, "Ever since the end of last year, as big brother's fame in poetry circles has soared, father, your name has also become more well-known."

Xu Pingzhi, who was playing with his daughter Xu Lingyin on his lap, froze for a moment before his face lit up with joy. He burst into laughter, saying, "Actually, it's all because of Dalang's innate talent. I didn't teach him much at all. Scholars just love to exaggerate things. So, how exactly are they praising me?"

Xu Erlang's lips curled slightly, "They're saying you are 'unworthy as a father.'"

"???"

Xu Pingzhi slammed the table in anger. "Outrageous! What gives them the right to say that?"

Xu Erlang glanced at his older brother, then chuckled, "The more poems big brother writes, the worse your reputation grows. Who knows, maybe your name will be passed down in the histories."

That night, Xu Pingzhi couldn't sleep, troubled by the thought.

Auntie scolded him, "You're still alive, and you're already worrying about your reputation hundreds of years from now. You're worrying over nothing."

"You're being short-sighted," Xu Pingzhi huffed, still uneasy. "Erlang has the potential to become prime minister, and Dalang will likely leave his mark on history too. But when it comes to me, history will only remember four words: 'unworthy as a father.'"

Auntie mumbled, "At least it's still making a name in history... By the way, what if Erlang gets posted somewhere far away? Can't you think of a way to keep him in the capital?"

"Don't even think about it. He's a student of the Cloud Deer Academy, and external appointments are inevitable. Let's just hope it's not too far away," Xu Pingzhi replied helplessly.

Students from Cloud Deer Academy typically had no hope of entering the political center of the capital. Most were assigned to provincial or regional posts, and even those who stayed in the capital were given minor, insignificant roles.

"How about you ask Ningyan for help? He's a Nightwatcher and even knows princesses. Surely he could figure something out," Auntie suggested, curling her legs as she sat on the bed, her brows knitted in concern.

"This is a matter for the Ministry of Personnel. What does it have to do with the Nightwatchers?" Xu Pingzhi whispered. "The Nightwatchers oversee government officials, which makes them disliked by the civil bureaucracy. Ningyan getting involved would only make things worse."

Auntie flopped onto the bed, clutching a pillow, still looking troubled.

.....

"Knock, knock, knock..."

Wearing a white inner robe and about to go to bed, Xu Erlang heard a knock at his door. Opening it, he found Xu Qi'an standing outside.



“Big brother, what brings you here?”

Xu Qi'an eyed his younger brother, who was handsome and refined, and grinned, “I came to help you guess exam topics.”

Chapter 262. Two Poems

"Guess exam topics?"

Xu Erlang asked in confusion but quickly understood what Xu Qi'an meant. He calmly poured his elder brother a cup of hot water, wrapped himself in an extra layer, and sat down in a chair. "No need," Xu Xinnian replied, "the great scholars of the academy have already predicted the topics for us."

After the establishment of the Imperial Academy, students' minds became confined to the Four Books and Five Classics, losing the creativity of their predecessors. One consequence was that poetry and prose faded away in the Great Feng. But there was one advantage: predicting exam topics became easier.

The so-called predicting topics was akin to Xu Qi'an's past life when teachers would underline key points before an exam. With limited content and set answering methods, the imperial examination topics could be somewhat “pre-determined”.

Aside from topic prediction, there were also shady practices—buying questions.

Even worse than buying the topics was the “prearranged candidate” practice. Such individuals could pass smoothly even if their writing was utter nonsense, all thanks to prior arrangements with the examiners.

The method was simple: bribing the examiner and agreeing on a secret code in advance. For example, the last word of the first line would be "old," the last word of the second line would be "bloke," and lines four, five, and six would be "666." When the examiner saw the code, they would know this was their candidate.

The name-concealing and transcription procedures couldn't prevent such cheating.

Xu Qi'an had heard these underhanded tricks from Wei Yuan and marvelled at the wisdom of the ancients.

Unfortunately, bribing an examiner was not an option. Xu Xinnian was a student of Cloud Deer Academy, meaning he was destined to miss out on the titles of \*Zhuangyuan\*, \*Bangyan\*, and \*Tanhua\*. He may not even make it into the top third.

Before meeting Zhong Li, Xu Qi'an only thought of helping his brother cheat subtly and avoiding being caught by the supervisors. After much thought, he came up with a ridiculous idea: copying the essay onto his “little brother”.

This idea was inspired by a humorous tale from the internet in his previous life. Someone was bragging that when women saw a single “zhi” tattooed onto him, they would think that it's his ex-girlfriend's name.

However when the spirit was excited and a pillar rose to heaven, it became “[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] [REDACTED]”

Though the story was absurd, Xu Qi'an found it relatable... Not that it mattered. What did matter was that Xu Erlang could absolutely pull off this trick.

With his Self-cultivator rank, Xu Erlang could simply say, "Behold my Diao Chan," and then he could write a 500-character essay on there.

The examiners would never discover it.

However, Xu Erlang was far too proud to ever resort to such tactics... Xu Qi'an nodded slowly, "What about poetry then?"

Xu Xinnian frowned, "I'm not focusing on poetry. It's not my strength."

His preparation was focused on the essays and classics, like most other scholars. Poetry was something he would leave to fate.

"Better safe than sorry. I came here exactly to guess poetry topics," Xu Qi'an said.

"And how do you plan to guess?"

"We'll draw lots," Xu Qi'an said with a mysterious smile.

...

"Mother, I want an orange."

In the inner room, Little Pea walked out in her loose nightgown.

"Oranges at night? Your teeth will rot. The oranges are in the hall; go get one yourself." Auntie was too preoccupied with discussing Xu Erlang's future.

Little Pea quietly went to the hall, ate the orange in the corridor, and returned, satisfied, to her bed.

Second Uncle and Auntie continued to discuss Xu Xinnian's career prospects. The more they talked, the more Auntie regretted sending Xu Xinnian to Cloud Deer Academy.

Erlang had been a prodigy since childhood, with an excellent memory. When Cloud Deer Academy was recruiting, Second Uncle had taken him to Qingyun Mountain to take the exam, and Erlang had passed with flying colors.

"If only we had sent him to the 1Academy," Auntie lamented.

"Women's foolishness. Cloud Deer Academy is the true orthodox of Confucianism," Second Uncle retorted.

...

Xu Xinnian cut a piece of Xuan paper into small squares, each with a different theme, such as "birds," "flowers," "fish," or "insects," then shuffled them together.

"Elder Brother, your turn."

Xu Xinnian thought his brother was being ridiculous, but given his enthusiasm, he couldn't refuse. He wanted to send his damned brother off quickly so he could sleep, but he was also curious to see if his brother could compose a poem on the spot.

Xu Qi'an closed his eyes and drew two slips at random.

"Two?"

Xu Xinnian noticed that his brother had drawn two slips at once.

"Let's take both then. We can use the extra one as backup."

Xu Qi'an opened the slips: "Ode to Aspiration" and "Patriotism."

Xu Xinnian looked at his elder brother with some anticipation.

"Uh... Let me think about it and get back to you tomorrow," Xu Qi'an scratched his head.

After saying goodbye to Xu Xinnian, Xu Qi'an returned to his room, lit a candle, and sat down at the table. He looked up at the beam of the ceiling and said, "Aren't you a Master of Prophecy? Can't you just predict the topics for the exam?"

Lying on the beam was a woman with disheveled hair, dressed in a simple linen robe. She replied, "A Master of Prophecy especially must know when to keep secrets. I don't have great fortune, and if I were to reveal the imperial exam topics, I might meet my end tomorrow."

"I'll protect you. Didn't Jianzheng say I have great fortune?" Xu Qi'an coaxed.

"If you have great fortune, then the topics you've drawn by lot are surely the exam topics. Why do you need me to take the risk?"

\*Good point...\* Xu Qi'an then asked, "Why not help me with the essay and classics questions?"

"The fewer variables, the easier to predict," Zhong Li said.

Xu Qi'an didn't press further and started to rummage through his memory for poetry from his high school days. Despite it being so many years ago, some poems were still etched clearly in his mind.

Of course, he couldn't remember longer works or classical texts fully, like Li Bai's *Bring in the Wine*, where he could only recall a few lines like "The waters of the Yellow River come from heaven."

But simple poems like *Spring Dawn* were unforgettable, even to death.

\*The most famous ode to aspiration is probably Cao Cao's\* *Though the Tortoise Lives Long*, \*but considering Emperor Yuanjing's desire for immortality, writing this might displease him.\*

\*As for patriotism, there are plenty of poems. The problem is that the patriotic poems I remember were born in times of national collapse, like\* *Iron horses ride through frozen rivers in my dreams*, \*or\* *The country falls, but the mountains and rivers remain*, \*or\* *Singing girls care not for the hatred of a fallen nation*. \*This is tough...\*

In the middle of the night, Xu Qi'an was sleeping soundly when he suddenly heard a thud and then the moans of someone in pain.

He jolted awake, instinctively reaching for the sword by his bedside.

"Sorry, I tripped..." Zhong Li muttered, trying to endure the pain.

\*Falling over from this too? You're a Fifth-Grade Arcanist after all...\* Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched as he let out a long sigh. "No worries, this must be part of your misfortune too, right?"

"This is still manageable. If I weren't near you, I probably would've broken a leg," replied Zhong Li, the Fifth Disciple of the Jianzheng, in a matter-of-fact tone, which made her words all the more heartbreaking. "It's fine. I'm used to it."

With that, she stood up quietly and headed toward the door. "I'll meditate outside, so I don't disturb your sleep."

"..."

Xu Qi'an watched her leave and closed the door behind her. He turned over and tried to go back to sleep. However, the door opened again, and Zhong Li returned.

"Hmm?"

Xu Qi'an made a confused and slightly annoyed noise.

Zhong Li spoke in a low voice, "Some bastard threw an orange peel in the corridor. I slipped on it and hit my head. I figured it's safer to stay indoors."

\*Orange peels too? That's rough...\* Xu Qi'an couldn't help but feel a surge of sympathy for her.

...

The next morning, before dawn, the Xu household was already brightly lit. Auntie, with dark circles under her eyes, was personally helping Xu Erlang prepare his exam materials, including ink, paper, brushes, as well as cakes, steamed buns, jerky, and water for the examination.

"Mother, there's no need to bring so much food. Each session only lasts one day, and I'll be out by dusk," Xu Xinnian tried to stop his mother, who was constantly stuffing food into his pack.

The imperial exams had three sessions, each lasting one day, with a three-day interval between sessions, making the whole process span nine days.

Once everything was ready, Xu Pingzhi, his wife, daughter, and nephew escorted Xu Xinnian to the examination compound.

Xu Qi'an and Xu Pingzhi carried lanterns, one leading and one following behind. Soon, they arrived at the examination hall, where a large number of scholars had already gathered. Soldiers with torches lined the street, maintaining order.

"Erlang, here are the poems I wrote for you. Read them and burn them afterward," Xu Qi'an handed two slips of paper to his brother.

Xu Xinnian discreetly accepted them, opened them, and after a long look, he could barely make out what was written... his brother's handwriting was truly unique, especially when writing smaller characters.

But these are good poems!

Despite the struggle to read them, Xu Xinnian couldn't help but admire his brother's talent.

\*If these happen to match the exam topics, I might really shine this time.\*

After memorizing them, Xu Xinnian tore up the slips of paper. As he was about to bid farewell to his family, he suddenly heard someone chanting Buddhist scriptures in the distance.

Turning to look, he saw a towering, bald man with his hands clasped together, giving him a knowing smile.

\*Do I know him...?\* Xu Xinnian felt a flicker of confusion but returned the gesture with a polite smile.

The bald man nodded slightly and turned to leave.

...

After seeing Xu Xinnian off, Auntie and Lingyue suggested returning home to catch up on sleep, while Xu Lingyin proposed going to Guiyuelou for breakfast.

Xu Lingyin's suggestion was unanimously ignored by the group.

Xu Qi'an, on the other hand, was concerned about Zhong Li back at the house, and worried that if he returned too late, she might have already passed away.

By the time they returned home, the sky had lightened with the break of dawn.

Xu Qi'an pushed open the door to find Zhong Li sitting cross-legged on the ground with her hair draped down, obscuring her face.

\*Why does she always have her hair down? I wonder what she really looks like... the Jianzheng's disciples are all so strange. The foodie chick somehow is the most normal one...\* Xu Qi'an cleared his throat and said:

"You don't need to hide. I can introduce you to my family."

"That would bring them misfortune. It won't be anything major, but small mishaps will happen continuously," Zhong Li replied. "Misfortune always affects those around me. But as long as they don't know about my presence, they'll be fine."

\*Ah whatever.\*

There was still some time before dawn, so Xu Qi'an decided to meditate for a while. Suddenly, he felt a jolt in his heart—someone from the Earth Book chat group had sent a message.

"Could you turn around?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Alright." Zhong Li obediently turned her back to him and continued meditating.

\*It's a little inconvenient having someone around...\* Xu Qi'an then retrieved his fragment of the Earth Book, using the candlelight to read the latest message.

**【TWO: I'm heading to the capital.】**

The first to respond to Li Miaozen's message was the rarely active Daoist Jinlian:

**【NINE: Have you finished eradicating the bandits?】**

\*Finished with the bandits? That means Brother Chun and the others should be returning soon too...\* Xu Qi'an felt a surge of joy.

**【TWO: Yes, Daoist. ONE, you still haven't provided me with the information about the standout disciples of the Human Sect.】**

Back then, she had exchanged the information on the Yunzhou case with Number One, hoping to get a list of the outstanding disciples of the Human Sect from him. However, Number One had inexplicably gone silent for a long time.

Even now, the promise had yet to be fulfilled.

A few minutes later, a long message from Number One arrived in the chat:

【ONE: The disciples of the Human Sect from this generation are not particularly strong. The highest-ranking among them is 'Jingchen,' who's only at the Seventh Grade. But there is one person, though I'm not sure if he counts as part of the younger generation.】

【TWO: Who is this person, and what is their level of cultivation?】

【ONE: He was originally a scholar, the top-ranked \*zhuangyuan\* in the twenty-seventh year of Yuanjing. In the twenty-ninth year, he suddenly resigned from his official post and became an ordinary commoner. He has a unique relationship with Daoist Lingyun, Senior Brother to Luo Yuheng, seeing him as both mentor and friend. Under Lingyun's guidance, he learned the sword techniques and Heart classic of the Human Sect.

【This person is highly talented. After abandoning literature to focus on the sword for only three years, he reached the state of complete sword mastery. Afterward, he challenged Gold Gong Chen Kaitai but was soundly defeated. Following his defeat, he wandered the world and was praised by Wei Yuan as the number one swordsman in the capital.

【Although he and Daoist Lingyun never officially became master and disciple, their relationship is effectively that. I'm not sure if that qualifies him as a Human Sect disciple.】

\*A scholar turned swordsman, the number one swordsman in the capital, with a mentor-disciple relationship with a Daoist from the Human Sect..\*. Why does this feel so familiar? Xu Qi'an paused, thinking of someone, but it seemed too absurd.

At that moment...

【FOUR: Heh, I've returned to the capital.】

\*It really is him. Daoist Jinlian is stirring the pot again. Knowing the Human Sect and Heaven Sect are like fire and water, he still drags them both into the Earth Book fragments.\* Xu Qi'an muttered inwardly.

\*This was getting interesting. Number Four and Number Two were both coming to the capital... Wait a minute, if it were just Li Miaozen coming, I could still handle it. After all, the explanation for my resurrection could be attributed to the Rebirth Pill.\*

\*Plus, both Li Miaozen and I have faced social death in some form, so we wouldn't hold onto it too much.\*

\*But if Number Four is also coming to the capital...\*

Xu Qi'an's expression changed.

Just then, Number Five chimed in:

【FIVE: What a coincidence, I'm also leaving for the capital tomorrow for a little adventure. Once I arrive, let's all have a drink together.】

Xu Qi'an: "???"

\*What's going on? Why is Number Five also heading to the capital? With her intelligence, Numbers Four and Two definitely won't feel comfortable letting her travel alone. When they meet up in person, they'll certainly have to log off and meet face to face.\*

\*And I'm in the capital too. Li Miaozen already knows my true identity...\*

\*No way, I have to make sure Erlang carries this pot.\*

【ONE: Why is FIVE going to the capital?】

【FIVE: For an adventure, of course.】

Suppressing her shock, Li Miaozen joined the conversation:

【TWO: Number Five, remember not to reveal your identity as part of the shaman clans. The people of Feng hate shamans. The martial world is dangerous, and even if you're tricked or harmed, if the authorities find out you're from the shaman clans, they'll likely turn a blind eye.

【In the eyes of many in the underworld, it's seen as justified to use any means necessary against the shamans.】

During the battle of Shanhai Pass years ago, the Southern and Northern barbarian tribes had formed an alliance against the Great Feng. Since then, the Southern tribes have frequently harassed the Great Feng's borders to reclaim lost territory, leading to deep-seated animosity between the two.

The shaman clans of the Southern Marches were seen as part of the Southern barbarians.

Lina thought about it and figured that since she wasn't afraid of poison or brute force, there wasn't much to worry about. But since Number Two was so kindly reminding her, she replied with thanks:

【FIVE: Got it, I'll be careful.】

Then, Li Miaozen added:

【TWO: FOUR, though we're both members of the Heaven and Earth Society, the grievances between our sects come first. I won't hold back when we meet.】

【FOUR: Life and death, each bears the consequences.】

\*This... Isn't this a bit too much? We're all part of the same group chat, after all.\* Xu Qi'an sighed.

After the conversation ended, Xu Qi'an put away the Earth Book fragment and looked up, glancing at Zhong Li, who was still sitting with her back to him.

\*Could it be that this woman's misfortune is affecting me? ... Maybe I should ask the Jianzheng for a refund...\*

Chapter 263. Xu Xinnian: I'm Meeting a lot of Nutcases this Year

In a small courtyard, Daoist Jinlian put away the Earth Book fragment, frowning silently.

Each member of the Earth Book chat group was a person of great fortune. The loss of any one of them was something he did not wish to see.

\*The conflict of Heaven and Man is a matter for the elders; there's no need for the younger generation to fight to the death. But if no one intervenes, with Li Miaozhen's stubbornness and Number Four's sharpness, I fear it will end with one dead and the other seriously injured.\*

\*Our Earth Sect cannot meddle in the Heaven and Human Sects' dispute. Number Six is not one for words, and Number One's status makes it inconvenient for him to intervene... It seems I'll have to push Xu Qi'an into the middle to smooth things over. Let him involve himself in the conflict of Heaven and Man, to lessen the hostility between Li Miaozhen and Number Four. This way, I can give the sect an explanation without needing them to fight to the death.\*

\*But his cultivation level is still too low. He's not qualified to interfere in a fight between Li Miaozhen and Number Four unless he can quickly cultivate to Bronze Skin and Iron Bones.\*

Cultivating Bronze Skin and Iron Bones in a short time was indeed a difficult task.

Daoist Jinlian furrowed his brows, pondering for a long time without coming up with a suitable plan, until he heard a sharp cat's meow from the courtyard.

... Shortly after, an orange cat left happily, tail held high.

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

...

After breakfast, Xu Qi'an rode his mare, bringing Zhong Li with him to the Nightwatchers Constabulary.

"I can't guarantee you'll be allowed into the constabulary, especially not the Tower of Noble Spirit," Xu Qi'an said, turning his head to Zhong Li.

She wasn't riding a horse but was instead walking beside his mare, leisurely as if taking a stroll after a meal.

\_Is this a Shrinking Ground spell?\_ Xu Qi'an silently envied as he watched her.

As soon as they entered the Constabulary, a Silver Gong hurried out with a dozen Bronze Gongs, running into Xu Qi'an.

The Silver Gong stopped to greet him, noticing the disheveled, hemp-clad Zhong Li, and asked, "Is this a Jianghu criminal who violated the law? Why isn't she bound?"

Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned, then asked, "What makes you say that?"



The Silver Gong explained, "You weren't on duty yesterday, so you wouldn't know. Duke Wei issued a proclamation yesterday. In three months, it will be the once-in-sixty-years conflict of Heaven and Man.

"Before that, the outstanding disciples of both Heaven and Human sects will compete first. For many martial artists, this is a once-in-a-lifetime event.

"As a result, many people of the Jianghu have flocked to the capital, eager to witness the duel between the disciples of Heaven and Man. My colleagues are stationed at the city gates, registering those entering and screening for potential spies from other nations."

\_Hmm? So Number Four and Number Two hold such high positions in the martial world?\_ Xu Qi'an thought, feeling he hadn't noticed before. \_Perhaps it's because I'm from a eunuch's family...\_ He nodded and bid farewell to the Silver Gong.

He arranged for Zhong Li to stay at Li Yuchun's Spring Wind Hall, while he headed to the Tower of Noble Spirit.

Zhong Li, being the fifth disciple of the Jianzheng, held a relatively high status, but it was useless. She couldn't meet Wei Yuan.

After the guard announced his arrival, Xu Qi'an ascended to the tea room on the seventh floor.

Wei Yuan stood in front of a giant geomantic map, still dressed in his usual azure robe. His hair was simply tied with a black jade hairpin, hands behind his back, and his sleeves hung low.

In terms of bearing, looks, and talent, Wei Yuan was unrivaled among the middle-aged and elderly men Xu Qi'an had met. Among the younger generation, in terms of appearance, Erlang and Nangong Qianrou were the best.

But in terms of overall capability, Xu Qi'an believed that the elder Xu brother was superior, and naturally the undisputed leader.

"Your appointment letter is on the table. Take it to the Ministry of Personnel later and get your badge and uniform," Wei Yuan said without turning around, simply pointing to the desk.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the desk and indeed saw a promotion letter stamped with Wei Yuan's seal.

The Nightwatchers' affairs were entirely under Wei Yuan's control. He could promote or demote anyone at will, so Xu Qi'an had no concerns about his promotion to Silver Gong.

"Once you become a Silver Gong, you won't need to patrol the streets anymore. You'll be able to sit in the office, giving you more time to manage as you see fit," Wei Yuan hinted. "Your talent is good, and your time shouldn't be wasted on routine duties."

\_This is the first time I've ever heard a boss tell his employee, 'You shouldn't waste your time on something as trivial as work.'\_ Xu Qi'an thought, lamenting that he hadn't met such a leader in his previous life, where he had dutifully worked as a corporate slave for nearly ten years.

He picked up the promotion letter and was about to take his leave when Wei Yuan said, "Don't be in a rush to go. The disciples of the Human Sect and Heaven Sect will soon duel. The capital will likely be unstable during this time, with troublemaking martial artists appearing here and there."

"Understood, sir. Your subordinate will ensure the inner city remains secure," Xu Qi'an immediately replied.

Wei Yuan nodded slowly and continued, "You've had contact with Li Miaozhen in Yunzhou. What's your impression of her?"

Li Miaozhen's identity as a disciple of the Heaven Sect had already been disclosed to Inspector Zhang and Jiang Lyuzhong in Baidi City. After Xu Qi'an's death, Inspector Zhang had sent a memorial to the capital during the bandit suppression campaign, highlighting Li Miaozhen's outstanding contributions.

He had even requested that the court grant her an official position.

Naturally, the request had been denied. After all, Luo Yuheng was the National Teacher of the Great Feng, and the Human Sect and Heaven Sect were like fire and water. This wasn't a matter to be taken lightly.

\_My impression of her...\_ Xu Qi'an pondered, feeling it could be summed up in one line: \_We unbound the general's armor and shared a warm spring night in the bedchamber.\_

"They're just two disciples. Does Duke Wei need to be so concerned?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"The attitudes of the disciples will determine the attitudes of their sect leaders," Wei Yuan replied, turning to look at him with a serious expression. "The Heaven Sect's leader is a first-rank."

This revelation left Xu Qi'an both shocked and unsurprised. Among the three Daoist sects, the Heaven Sect was the most powerful. The leaders of the Human Sect and Earth Sect were second-rank. If the Heaven Sect didn't have a first-rank leader, then how could it come to dominate?

But this also meant that Luo Yuheng was destined to lose, didn't it?

Xu Qi'an wasn't particularly interested in whether Luo Yuheng would win or lose. He understood Wei Yuan's implication: if the duel between the disciples wasn't handled properly, the leaders of the Heaven and Human Sects might fight to the death.

First- and second-rank cultivators were the pinnacle of power in the world. Even Wei Yuan, with his unparalleled intellect, couldn't afford to be careless. Meanwhile, the Jianzheng, the hidden trump card of the capital, was only a first-rank.

"Sir, there's something I haven't reported to you yet," Xu Qi'an said, preparing to share the secrets of the Heaven and Earth Society.

Wei Yuan gave a soft hum, signaling him to continue.

"Li Miaozhen is a member of the Heaven and Earth Society and holds Fragment Number Two. The disciple sent by the Human Sect should be the swordsman you once praised as the best in the capital," Xu Qi'an reported.

This news took Wei Yuan by surprise. He left the geomantic map, returned to his desk, and sat down, his voice steady as he said, "Tell me everything in detail."

Xu Qi'an immediately recounted the chat history from the "Earth Book" group chat from the previous night.

"Your timing is impeccable," Wei Yuan nodded approvingly.

His "favour" toward this Bronze Gong, Xu Qi'an, was complex and multi-faceted. The first factor was character—reliable and trustworthy. Talent was the second factor—Xu Qi'an's potential was something Wei Yuan believed was worth cultivating.

Then, there was Xu Qi'an's personality, which differed from character. He was clever, slick, and knew how to flatter, but maintained his principles. Lastly, Xu Qi'an always managed to surprise Wei Yuan, whether in solving cases or providing valuable intelligence, constantly proving his worth.

Wei Yuan was pleased that Xu Qi'an wasn't like some prodigies who, despite their immense talent, were utterly useless when it came to real-world tasks.

"Try to cooperate with Daoist Jinlian as much as possible," Wei Yuan said out of the blue.

Seeing Xu Qi'an's confusion, he explained, "Daoist Jinlian founded the Heaven and Earth Society and has been searching across Jiuzhou for worthy holders of the Earth Book fragments. His original intent was to clean his house and eliminate the sect leader who had fallen into the demonic way."

Xu Qi'an nodded; Daoist Jinlian had personally informed Wei Yuan of his motives.

"Thus he won't just stand by and watch the holders of the Earth Book fragments fight themselves. He'll try to mediate, but since he's from the Earth Sect, which has always remained neutral, he can't interfere directly. He'll likely ask for your help."

"What on earth can I help with... ha, haha..." Xu Qi'an began to laugh, but his smile slowly froze.

Unaware of how Xu Qi'an had been boasting in the Earth Book chat group, Wei Yuan didn't notice the shift in his expression. Instead, he said, "The Western Sect is also on its way to the capital."

Xu Qi'an was taken aback and wondered how Wei Yuan knew this... but soon realized that a formal visit from the Western Sect to the capital of the Great Feng wouldn't go unnoticed. It was like a diplomatic visit between two nations—everything had to be arranged in advance.

\*With the imperial examinations, the Western Sect, and the impending conflict of Heaven and Man... things are getting complicated,\* Xu Qi'an thought, feeling the weight of the situation.

At that moment, the sound of drums and gongs echoed from outside, accompanied by distant shouts of, "Fire! Fire!"

A fire?!

Xu Qi'an had been a Nightwatcher for almost half a year, and this was his first time encountering such an incident. His heart sank as a sense of foreboding filled him.

"Duke Wei, I must take my leave!" he said hastily.

He quickly stood up, cupped his hands in salute, and rushed out of the Tower of Noble Spirit, scanning the area. He soon spotted clerks and Nightwatchers carrying buckets and rushing toward the direction of Spring Breeze Hall.

...

Fifteen minutes later, a Golden Gong on duty managed to extinguish the fire, but Spring Breeze Hall had been reduced to ashes, now nothing but a charred ruin. Thankfully, there were no casualties.

The Golden Gong, clearly upset, ordered the Nightwatchers to investigate the cause of the fire.

In a quiet courtyard nearby, Zhong Li sat on the ground, her hair singed and curled. Her linen robe was burned through in several spots, revealing patches of her pale skin.

"I was just sitting in the room, minding my own business, and somehow the fire started. If you had been a little later, I might have been roasted..." she said, still shaken.

"You're a Fifth-grade Arcanist, surely ordinary fire couldn't harm you?"

"I was meditating and had a Qi deviation," Zhong Li explained.

"..."

Feeling sorry for her, Xu Qi'an said, "Let me take you to bathe and change into some clean clothes."

...

As dusk fell, Xu Xinnian, having finished his first round of the imperial exams, left the examination hall. Following the other scholars out onto the street, he looked around and realized that his father, brother, and sister hadn't come to pick him up.

"Father and Brother are probably still on duty, and Mother and Sister likely didn't feel comfortable coming out alone," he consoled himself.

He slung his book box over his shoulder and began walking home, casting a minor spell on himself as he did. With a soft pat on his leg, he activated his literary aura and chanted:

"Light as a swallow!"

An invisible force wrapped around him, and he moved with the speed and grace of a gust of wind, walking as fast as a carriage.

Suddenly, a voice called out from ahead, "What a good 'light as a swallow'!"

Xu Xinnian stopped in his tracks and turned toward the voice. Standing by the roadside was a young swordsman in an azure robe, carrying a sword on his back. He had a handsome, unruly look, and though he appeared young, the lock of white hair at his forehead hinted at a life full of experiences.

Before Xu Xinnian could respond, the swordsman smiled and said, "The first round of the imperial exams is over, and if it were up to my past habits, the next three days would be spent drinking and celebrating with classmates at the Jiaofangsi.

"That was nine years ago. By now, the courtesans of that time must be past their prime or have found good husbands. But I've heard there's a new Oiran in the capital, famous for her poetry and music. I think I'll go and see for myself.

"Brother, why don't we go together?"

Xu Xinnian listened in silence, thinking only one thing: \*This man is an idiot.\*

The way he spoke, so familiarly, as if they were close friends, and then the way he winked at Xu Xinnian... But Xu Xinnian was absolutely certain that he had never met this person before.

\*What's with today? First, a strange monk before the exam, and now a foolish swordsman after...\*

Ignoring the man, Xu Xinnian quickly ran away.

Boys need to protect themselves out in the world.

...

The sun slowly set, casting a red glow across the sky. Xu Qi'an led Zhong Li to the Jiaofangsi.

"I wonder if Fuxiang has recovered from her illness. Women of this era are so delicate, falling ill at the slightest chill," Xu Qi'an mused as he brought Zhong Li along to check on Fuxiang's condition.

Zhong Li, still in her linen robe, had just bathed, but her hair was a tangled mess, hanging down to cover her face.

Xu Qi'an guessed that she might be disfigured or have some sort of scar, which is why she never showed her true face.

Chapter 264. Two Brothers Two Talents

"Is Fuxiang your lover at the Jiaofangsi?" Zhongli asked.

Xu Qi'an was taken aback, "How did you know?"

Zhongli nodded slightly, lowered her head a bit, and walked leisurely. "If she wasn't someone important to you, why would you invite me to treat her illness? You're a man of great fortune; you wouldn't be like those other men who become slaves under their oiran's skirt."

\*Fifth Senior Sister, you've got a knack for being a detective...\* Xu Qi'an let out an "mm" and said, "Well, Fuxiang is sort of like my confidante. When I was younger, I was talented, with an excellent memory, a natural-born scholar.

"But my second uncle planned my life early on, causing the Great Feng to miss out on a literary giant... When I was fourteen, I attended a literary gathering organised by students of the Imperial College with my cousin. It was snowing and raining that day... You know what a literary gathering is, right? It's a scholarly meeting where Jiaofangsi girls are invited to play music, and Fuxiang was among them.

"I made a stunning debut at the gathering, and everyone praised my poetry. Fuxiang, too, was captivated by me. Since then, we've exchanged letters, engaging in a purely platonic romance. Platonic, meaning spiritual love, with absolutely no vulgar physical relationship..."

Zhongli interrupted coldly, "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Promise me, don't tell Caiwei."

"Oh."

Zhongli turned her head to glance at him briefly, then turned back and continued walking. As they neared Reflecting Plum Pavilion, she said, "I know the Qi-watching technique."

"....."

Before they even reached the pavilion, Xu Qi'an could already hear the sounds of flutes and strings.

\*Huh, why is Reflecting Plum Pavilion hosting a gathering so early today?\* He walked with Zhongli to the courtyard gate and found the two black-painted doors tightly shut, with the music coming from inside.

\_Bang bang bang... Xu Qi'an knocked on the door.

"The pavilion is booked for a private event," a voice from inside responded.

"It's me," Xu Qi'an said.

The gate opened, and a young servant in a azure robe greeted him with joy, "Young Master Xu, you're finally here! There's quite an extraordinary guest inside tonight."

Hearing this, Xu Qi'an frowned. "An extraordinary guest?"

To him, anyone below the rank of three wasn't "extraordinary."

Officials of that stature rarely visited the Jiaofangsi.

The servant chuckled mysteriously, "As soon as he arrived, he came straight to Reflecting Plum Pavilion and asked to witness our lady's skill on the qin. Initially, she wasn't planning to accompany him, but after a long private discussion with the madam, she reluctantly agreed."

"Even more surprising, twelve Oirans from the Jiaofangsi came uninvited to accompany him."

Xu Qi'an was astonished. Not even an old fox like Prime Minister Wang would have this kind of treatment. Then again, the old man probably didn't have the time or energy for such pleasures anymore.

\*Interesting, seems like there's still someone of this calibre in the capital. No way, Jiaofangsi is my turf. I have to meet this guy.\*

With that thought, Xu Qi'an calmly nodded, "Take me to see him."

...

Inside the banquet hall where the guest was being entertained, Fuxiang sat in the centre, her head slightly bowed as she played the qin. She looked both elegant and enchanting, exuding a kind of beauty that transcended her role as an Oiran, more akin to a noble lady from a great family.

The guests were seated in rows, each with an oiran beside them, except for the man in the azure robe with a streak of white hair at his forehead. He sat alone, calm and unperturbed.

After finishing her piece, Fuxiang rose gracefully and bowed, "I've embarrassed myself."

"Lady Fuxiang is far too modest. Among the Jiaofangsi, none can rival your skill on the qin," said a man with a goatee and casual attire, smiling.

"Come, join us, we've been waiting for you," added a rotund man beside him.

The guests started to coax and cheer.

One of them even made a teasing remark, "Since that poem praising plum blossoms, Lady Fuxiang no longer accompanies guests, but since Brother Chu is here, things may change. Lady Fuxiang, don't keep him waiting."

Fuxiang's gaze swept across the guests. Each of them held significant status—either officials with real power in the Six Ministries or respected scholars in the Hanlin Academy and the Censorate.

And as for the man in the azure robe, he was not just any man. He was the \*zhuangyuan\* from the 27th year of Yuanjing, now hailed as the capital's number one swordsman.

He embodied the romantic fantasy of the Jiaofangsi women, being both a literary genius and a renowned swordsman. When word of his visit to the Jiaofangsi spread, twelve Oirans had come voluntarily to accompany him.

"Please forgive me, gentlemen. I am not feeling well today and am unfit to drink," Fuxiang said, smiling demurely before moving to an empty seat.

Several officials frowned, their displeasure evident. Although Fuxiang was famous throughout the capital, her self-regard seemed excessive. They were only asking her to accompany them for drinks, not to do anything untoward.

The azure-robed swordsman, however, laughed it off, showing no sign of being offended.

All the guests were scholars from the 27th year of Yuanjing, and they had good relations with him. Tonight's gathering at the Jiaofangsi was both a reunion and a chance to witness the famed Fuxiang's talent.

To Zhuangyuan Chu, her appearance was secondary; it was her reserved demeanour that impressed him.

Mingyan glanced around with a bright smile, warming up the atmosphere, "Ever since Lady Fuxiang got together with Sir Xu, she no longer accompanies guests. She's still waiting for Sir Xu to redeem her, so let's not make things difficult for her, shall we?"

Though all the guests present were powerful officials, in front of a Nightwatcher, they were all like younger brothers. Especially before Xu Qi'an, who had just been granted a noble title — they were like the younger brothers of younger brothers.

As expected, the guests suppressed their displeasure and lowered their heads to drink.

Zhuangyuan Chu raised an eyebrow, "Sir Xu? Which Sir Xu?"

For certain reasons, the name "Xu" struck a chord with him.

He recalled a conversation in the Earth Book chat group when Number Two asked Number One for information on a certain Bronze Gong with the surname Xu. Number One had replied with a description of the man's greatest flaw: "He's a lecher, involved with many Oiran from the Jiaofangsi..."

Then, connecting this to Number Three, whom he had just met yet pretended not to know him, he realised that this person indeed had a cousin of exceptional poetic talent. His cousin was the one who composed *\*its subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk\** and gave Fuxiang her fame.

Mingyan waited for a moment, and seeing no one else speaking, smiled and began to explain, "This Sir Xu is truly an extraordinary figure. He rose to prominence during last October's tax silver case..."

She proceeded to recount Xu Qi'an's various exploits with pride and familiarity.

"When he was in Yunzhou, he stood alone, facing eight thousand enemy troops, fighting alone for an entire hour..."

Though the Oiran had heard this tale several times, they still listened with fascination, their hearts captivated by the romance of the story.

Fuxiang felt a mix of pride and delight as she lifted her chin slightly, her voice soft, "At the moment when dear Master Xu was exhausted, he stood facing thousands of enemies."

Another Oiran, Xiaoya, quickly joined in, her crisp voice reciting, "A young man's valour, brings heroes from five capitals old! With loyal heart, with just hand. With words of iron, life or death, A promise is worth a thousand tons of gold!"

"What beautiful words!"

Zhuangyuan Chu praised loudly, though a question arose in his mind:

\*Didn't Number Two say that the rebels who besieged the Provincial Governor's Office numbered more than four hundred, and Xu Qi'an died after slaying two hundred of them? How had the number suddenly become eight thousand?\*

An official remarked, "Indeed, what a fine verse. Such a talent—it's a shame he didn't pursue his studies further. That Xu Pingzhi is truly despicable."

The other guests nodded in agreement, one adding, "What a pity that Xu Qi'an isn't here at the Jiaofangsi today. He should witness the talents of our Zhuangyuan Chu."

Hearing this, Zhuangyuan Chu's mind filled with confusion:

\*Hadn't Xu Qi'an died in Yunzhou? After all this time, it was impossible that the capital hadn't received the news.\*

Just then, Fuxiang's delighted voice broke the tension, "Master Xu!"

...

The servant in blue led Xu Qi'an into the courtyard and toward the main hall. As they walked, he said, "Not to stir things up, but the guest inside is even more popular than you."

"I asked the sisters in the courtyard about him. Turns out, he's a legend. He was the top scholar in the imperial exam of Yuanjing 27. Later, for some reason, he resigned and became a wanderer in the Jianghu. Afterward, he made a name for himself, gaining great fame in the capital, and was praised by Duke Wei as the top swordsman in the capital."

Xu Qi'an's steps suddenly halted as he thought, \_Fuck, is Number Four in there?\_

\*What's going on with these zhuangyuan? Are they all seasoned veterans of the Jiaofangsi?\*

\*Number Four knows I'm Number Three's cousin and that I supposedly died in Yunzhou... Now when he sees I'm still alive, he'll report it back to the Earth Book chat group, and then Li Miaozen will remember how she had socially died thanks to being "guided" by Number Three...\*

Xu Qi'an hadn't anticipated his social death coming so soon.

"Dear Xu!"

Fuxiang's excited shout sent a chill down Xu Qi'an's spine, realising his social death was coming even sooner than expected.

In the main hall, the guests and oirans all turned their heads, their gazes falling upon him.



\*Given the current tense relationship between Number Two and Number Four, they probably wouldn't engage in conversation too quickly. Better play it safe...\* Xu Qi'an swiftly repressed all emotion, donned a smile, and stepped into the hall, bowing courteously.

"Apologies for interrupting, everyone."

The officials greeted him warmly, calling him "Viscount," and invited him to join them as if they were old acquaintances. The Oiran's eyes sparkled with delight.

"Dear Xu."

Fuxiang's smile was radiant as she took his hand, guiding him to a seat and eagerly pouring wine.

As Xu Qi'an sat, he glanced back and noticed Zhong Li was nowhere to be found.

\_She's probably hiding somewhere... Don't stray too far, or the Jiaofangsi might get burned down by morning...\_ With these thoughts in mind, Xu Qi'an turned his gaze toward Number Four, calmly sizing him up.

Number Four was a handsome man with a streak of white hair at his forehead, adding to his charm. He carried himself with a relaxed, unassuming air, showing no sharpness.

Zhuangyuan Chu also sized up Xu Qi'an. His appearance alone made him believe this Nightwatcher must indeed be Number Three's cousin.

Both brothers were undeniably handsome.

\_How is he still alive...\_ Zhuangyuan Chu nodded slightly and said, "Chu Yuanzhen, courtesy name Zizhen."

Xu Qi'an cupped his hands, "Xu Qi'an, courtesy name Ningyan."

Next came drinking games. The Oiran Xiaoya acted as the game master, leading them in rounds of poetic matching and word games, keeping the atmosphere lively.

The only disappointment was that Xu Qi'an didn't participate, leaving everything to Fuxiang while he simply ate and drank.

Xu Qi'an's purpose for coming to the Jiaofangsi tonight was to check on Fuxiang. Seeing that she was in good spirits and health, he was reassured that it had merely been a slight cold, and he'd worried for nothing.

"With such a beautiful scene tonight, Sir Xu truly must compose a poem for us," one of the officials urged, trying to coax Xu Qi'an into making a poem.

Xu Qi'an declined, saying his inspiration was dried up.

This left the officials disappointed, and even the oirans expressed regret.

In truth, Xu Qi'an wasn't unwilling to compose poetry, he simply hadn't found the appropriate poem to recite.

Today, Wei Yuan had tasked him with mediating the situation between Number Four and Number Two, ensuring their duel would end without a decisive outcome. To accomplish that, he needed to raise his favor with Number Four.

"Brother Chu, I heard from my colleagues in the constabulary that with the upcoming conflict of Heaven and Man, the disciple of the Heaven Sect, Li Miaozen, will be coming to the capital soon. As a sword cultivator of the Human Sect, I imagine..."

Xu Qi'an trailed off, but the implication was clear.

Zhuangyuan Chu smiled, "I will represent the Human Sect in the contest against the disciple of the Heaven Sect."

He was well aware that Xu Qi'an had become acquainted with Li Miaozen in Yunzhou and that, being a favored Bronze Gong of Wei Yuan, it wasn't surprising he knew about these things.

Taking the opportunity, Xu Qi'an's gaze fell on the long sword leaning against the table, curiosity in his eyes, "May I have the honour of seeing this sword's brilliance?"

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head, "Since my defeat by Zhang Kaitai, this sword has remained unsheathed."

"Then it's over; this sword is going to rust away in its scabbard," Xu Qi'an blurted out.

"What?" Chu Yuanzhen looked confused.

"I mean to ask why you don't draw your sword."

Chu Yuanzhen smiled gently, without any arrogance, and explained, "I am nurturing my sword's energy. When it is drawn again, its brilliance reach ten thousand feet."

Xu Qi'an nodded slowly, suddenly feeling a spark of inspiration. He grasped his wine cup, furrowing his brows as if in deep thought.

"Is something the matter?" Number Four asked.

Xu Qi'an sighed and said, "Earlier, I was uninspired, but after hearing Brother Chu's words, my mind has suddenly come alive, and I can't help but compose a poem."

The guests and Oiran's eyes lit up with excitement, watching eagerly.

Chu Yuanzhen, equally surprised and pleased, straightened his posture, "I await your verse with great anticipation."

## Chapter 265. Pot-Carrying Hero

As he copied more and more poems, Xu Qi'an gradually figured out the secret of scholars "manifesting their sacredness." Answering questions directly is something only a fool would do.

You must keep people in suspense, tantalise them.

Just like now, from Number Four to the wine patrons, from the patrons to the courtesans, from the courtesans to the maidservants attending at the banquet, everyone was watching him, eyes filled with anticipation.

Under everyone's gaze, Xu Qi'an rose, pacing slowly in the hall. After seven steps, he stopped and calmly said, "A sword honed ten years long."

Chu Yuanzhen was momentarily stunned. He had just mentioned nurturing his sword, and Xu Qi'an immediately followed up with this line—there was no doubt, this poem was made just for him.

Number Four was moved. He had never met Xu Qi'an before, yet after a few drinks, he was willing to compose a poem for him. His friendliness and sincerity put others to shame.

Number Three was a scholar with a chivalrous heart. Although he had some minor flaws, being somewhat profit-driven, overall, he was someone worth befriending. His cousin, Xu Qi'an, was even more warm-hearted and kind—a true brother.

At the same time, Chu Yuanzhen thought of Ziyang Jushi's example, and his heart began to burn with excitement. He, too, was a scholar who loved poetry. Faced with such a rare opportunity, how could he not feel anticipation?

Xu Qi'an scanned the room and recited the second line: "Its icy edge not tested."

\*A sword honed ten years long, its icy edge not tested\*... The officials present savored the poem, smiling, their eyes shining.

This couplet was perfectly structured. Whether in its charm or its meaning, it surpassed Xu Qi'an's previous works. Yet the beauty of poetry lies not only in its rhythm and imagery.

A sword honed ten years long, its icy edge not tested!

With such a simple phrase, ambition and passion leapt from the page. A sword honed ten years long—this sense of self-assuredness could only come from someone as young and successful as him.

Chu Yuanzhen's eyes brightened, and he unconsciously straightened his back, leaning forward in anticipation of the next line.

It was so fitting, too fitting.

Over the years, he had travelled far and wide, broadening his horizons, nurturing his sword qi. This supreme weapon of the Human Sect had remained sheathed, never shown to the world.

But its time to be unsheathed would come. Yet Chu Yuanzhen himself hadn't thought about what kind of situation would lead him to draw his sword.

It wasn't until recently, when the Daoist leader of the Human Sect sent a flying sword message summoning him back to face the challenge from the Heaven Sect disciple Li Miaozen, that Chu Yuanzhen finally realised: this was the moment he had been waiting for.

However, a sense of regret lingered. This sword, once unsheathed, would certainly shake the heavens and the earth. But using it to cut down Li Miaozen was not what he desired.

"What will the next line be? When will the sword, honed for ten years long, finally be drawn?"

Chu Yuanzhen pondered, eager for inspiration.

At this moment, Xu Qi'an sighed and shook his head: "I haven't thought of the next line yet."

"!!!"

"Wait, what? How can there be no next line? It can't just end like this! A poem can't only have the first couplet."

"Sur Xu, don't be capricious; we're still waiting."

"What's the next line? Think about it, think..."

In the hall, everyone widened their eyes, unable to accept the abrupt ending.

Xu Qi'an shrugged, holding his wine cup as he returned to his seat, helplessly saying, "Truly, I haven't thought of it yet. How about this: I'll compose half a poem now, and I'll finish the other half for Brother Chu later. How's that?"

"...That's all we can do then," Chu Yuanzhen replied, disappointed.

The others reluctantly accepted this outcome.

The drinking games continued. Although the elegant games were refined, the atmosphere was somewhat dull, so Fuxiang suggested a game of finger-guessing, which received unanimous approval.

The courtesans played finger-guessing with the wine patrons, and everyone was having a great time.

"How about we play pitch-pot instead?" suggested Zhuangyuan Chu, who didn't have a beauty by his side.

This banquet was held specifically to welcome him, as he was the guest of honour. His suggestion naturally stood.

Pitch-pot followed simple rules. A pot was placed in the middle of the hall, and each patron was given three arrows. Those who missed had to drink, while those who hit the target could command anyone present to drink.

After a few rounds, the officials, now slightly tipsy, gradually shifted from players to spectators, and then from spectators to cheering onlookers.

Only Xu Qi'an and Chu Yuanzhen remained in the pitch-pot game, hitting the mark with every shot. It was as if they were locked in a silent competition, neither willing to concede.

The courtesans cheered on both sides. Whenever either Xu Qi'an or Chu Yuanzhen scored, they clapped and shouted with flushed, excited faces.

Such an intense pitch-pot duel was rarely seen.

At first, the courtesans cheered impartially, but gradually, they divided into two factions—one supporting Chu Yuanzhen and the other becoming Xu Qi'an's fans, comprised entirely of women he had slept with, like Fuxiang, Mingyan, and Xiaoya.

"This game isn't decisive. I suggest we blindfold ourselves," said Xu Qi'an.

Chu Yuanzhen thought for a moment, then shook his head. "Even blindfolded, I will hit every shot. My suggestion is: each of us gets twenty arrows, and whoever finishes first wins."

What a clever idea!

The wine patrons and courtesans brightened up, enthusiastically agreeing with the proposal.

Fuxiang ordered a maidservant to bring silk scarves and blindfolded the two of them. Xu Qi'an noticed that the scarf was translucent, allowing him to vaguely see the outline of the pot.

He silently turned around, his back facing the target.

Chu Yuanzhen was momentarily taken aback, then smiled and followed suit, also turning his back. The atmosphere in the hall grew even livelier. Not only were they blindfolded, but they were now shooting with their backs turned—this was a game none of them had seen before.

"How can they play like this?" Mingyan giggled. "Who could possibly hit the target?"

Another courtesan laughed, "Whichever one of the two masters wins, Mingyan will serve him tonight."

Mingyan blushed and let out a soft "tsk," stealing a glance at Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an, ever cheeky, burst into laughter from beneath his blindfold, "No, no, that's too little of a prize. I want all of you."

The courtesans didn't shy away. Giggling, they responded, "Tomorrow, Sir Xu will surely need to hold on to the walls when he goes to the constabulary."

Laughter erupted from all sides, the women's voices chirping like birds.

"Number Three rejected my invitation, showing that he's a proper man who never visits brothels. But his elder brother is the complete opposite," thought Chu Yuanzhen, amused. This Xu Qi'an was indeed a flamboyant character, at ease in the Jiaofangsi, more open than any scholar.

For the current literati, the Jiaofangsi and brothels were more social venues, places to entertain colleagues and classmates. Ordinary taverns were for commoners—people of real status preferred the Jiaofangsi.

With talented and outstanding courtesans acting as the hosts, and demure maids serving wine, this was the epitome of style.

But scholars, mindful of their reputations, would not indulge too much. Xu Qi'an, however, was different.

"Better to die under a peony than live a boring life!" Xu Qi'an said, holding Fuxiang by her slender waist.

The sudden aphorism made everyone present silently admire him. How could someone have such terrifying talent, able to spout clever lines and fine poetry at will?

If this man studied, he would surely become a grand Confucian scholar.

Xu Pingzhi was truly despicable.

"Thud!"

An arrow precisely hit the pitcher, snapping everyone out of their scattered thoughts and refocusing their attention.

After throwing his first arrow, Xu Qi'an smiled and said, "Brother Chu, it's started."

"Alright!" Chu Yuanzhen responded calmly.

While speaking, he casually tossed an arrow backward, hitting the target perfectly.

"Woah...."

Mingyan exclaimed, her eyes widening in amazement.

Thud, thud, thud...

Xu Qi'an and Chu Yuanzhen took turns throwing arrows, each one hitting its mark. With every successful throw, the oiran cheered in awe, as if witnessing something beyond their expectations.

This simple game of pitch-pot had been transformed into a spectacular competition by the two of them.

Arrow after arrow flew, and by the time Xu Qi'an had thrown his tenth, Chu Yuanzhen had already thrown thirteen, with only seven arrows left in his hand.

When Xu Qi'an had five arrows left, Chu Yuanzhen had only two remaining.

It seemed the winner was clear.

The oirans who supported Xu Qi'an, like Fuxiang and Mingyan, looked disappointed, unable to hide their sense of loss. Meanwhile, those rooting for Chu Yuanzhen began applauding early, ready to celebrate the top scholar of Yuanjing 27.

The officials watching seemed unsurprised by the outcome, their smiles calm and composed. To them, Chu Yuanzhen was a legendary figure. Even during his time as a scholar, he stood out among his peers, excelling in both talent and appearance. Later, when he abandoned his literary pursuits to practice Daoism, no one believed in him. A close friend even severed ties with him out of frustration.

But who would have expected that within just a few years, he would rise to fame, challenging the Golden Gong Zhang Kaitai and, despite his defeat, earning the admiration of Wei Yuan as the greatest swordsman in the capital?

Such a genius, they thought, naturally outshone someone like Xu Qi'an, who was merely good at solving cases.

By this time, Chu Yuanzhen had already thrown his second-to-last arrow, which landed precisely in the pitcher.

Fuxiang glanced away from the pitcher and looked at Xu Qi'an, only to be stunned by the faint smile on his lips... She knew that smile well. Xu Qi'an always smiled like that whenever he was confident of his victory.

Could he still turn things around?!

Just as the thought crossed her mind, she witnessed something absurd. Xu Qi'an threw all five of his remaining arrows simultaneously. They flew in a perfect arc through the air, landing neatly in the pitcher.

The five arrows made a single sound: Thud!

The hall instantly fell into silence, with everyone's eyes widened in disbelief.

Did that just happen?

"Ah!" Mingyan screamed in excitement, throwing herself into Xu Qi'an's arms. "Sir Xu, your servant loves you to death!"

Fuxiang frowned slightly.

“Incredible skill!” one censor praised.

“Who knew pitch-pot could be played like this? Truly eye-opening,” another official agreed with a smile.

The oirans, gazing at Xu Qi'an, were now filled with admiration.

Chu Yuanzhen removed his blindfold and smiled. “Impressive, very impressive.”

The banquet continued until nine, with the oirans yawning and bidding farewell, their skirts swaying gracefully as they moved. Though they were tired, the women were still reluctant to leave, finding the gathering far too entertaining with both Xu Qi'an and the capital's top swordsman in attendance. Unfortunately, such high-quality guests were rare.

Mingyan discreetly scribbled a message on Xu Qi'an's palm, inviting him to her residence at Azure Pond Pavilion, only to be sarcastically teased by Fuxiang with a few cold remarks before she was seen out.

Chu Yuanzhen did not stay the night at the Jiaofangsi and soon took his leave. Xu Qi'an personally escorted him out of the courtyard.

\*Number Four is so indifferent and carefree, with the integrity of a true scholar... I can't find any way to make him socially embarrassed at all...\* Xu Qi'an watched the figure of the scholar-swordsman in the green robe with some regret.

Still, every scholar had their weakness — such as poetry.

He decided to hold onto the second half of the poem and reveal it at the right moment.

After the servants finished cleaning up, Fuxiang took Xu Qi'an's arm and led him into the bedroom. Xu Qi'an sat by the table, sipping tea when his ears caught a sound. He glanced at the screen, where the flickering candlelight cast a graceful silhouette. Behind it, he saw her slowly removing her clothes and changing into a light, gauzy robe.

As they bathed together, Xu Qi'an suddenly said:

“I'll buy your freedom in a few days.”

Fuxiang paused, her intelligent eyes flashing with a complicated emotion before settling into a calm smile. “Dear Master Xu, you've just become a viscount. Taking a concubine now wouldn't be good for your reputation.”

“Alright then,” Xu Qi'an chuckled, wrapping his arms around her slender waist.

After their bath, the two tumbled onto the bed. Just as the passionate battle reached its peak, there was a sudden cracking sound followed by a jolt as the bed collapsed.

Fuxiang shrieked, wrapping her legs tightly around Xu Qi'an like a coiled snake.

\*...Zhong Li, I want a refund from the Jianzheng!\*

Xu Qi'an was fucking furious.

...

Outside Reflecting Plum Pavilion, Chu Yuanzhen lightly tapped his sword, and the longsword on his back came to life like a swimming fish, freeing itself from its bindings to hover in front of him, still in its scabbard.

Chu Yuanzhen stepped onto the scabbard and softly commanded, "Go."

The sword hesitated for a moment before piercing the night sky, soaring upwards.

As he flew into the night, Chu Yuanzhen felt countless gazes from within the capital locking onto him, only to shift away just as quickly. The one that sent chills down his spine came from the towering Stargazing Tower.

He soon left the inner city, heading south toward the outer city.

If he remembered correctly, Number Six, Hengyuan, should be at the Welfare Hall. He lowered his altitude and searched for a while before finally finding the hall in the southern part of the city.

Chu Yuanzhen wasn't a native of the capital. He studied at the Imperial Academy and passed the imperial examinations, living in the inner city all this time. He had never been to the poverty-stricken outer city.

Lowering his sword, he landed lightly in the courtyard of the Welfare Hall. As he stepped off the scabbard, he heard the sound of a Buddhist chant from under the eaves:

"Amitufo."

Gripping the hilt of his sword, Chu Yuanzhen sheathed it and followed the sound, spotting a burly monk dressed in simple blue robes standing under the eaves. The monk had thick eyebrows, large eyes, and rugged facial features.

"Master Hengyuan?" Chu Yuanzhen greeted with a smile.

"That is this poor monk. Sir must be Number Four?" Hengyuan clasped his hands in a salute, quietly assessing him.

The two, meeting for the first time, remained calm, neither too distant nor too familiar. Hengyuan led Chu Yuanzhen into the room, lit an oil lamp, and pulled out a jar of wine from under the bed, along with two porcelain bowls. He wiped the dust off with his sleeve.

Chu Yuanzhen never turned down wine. He downed it in one gulp but couldn't help asking, "Monks can drink?"

Hengyuan answered steadily, "Warrior monks don't have dietary restrictions."

There was an unspoken implication: Warrior monks don't follow the precepts.

"I met Number Three today."

Chu Yuanzhen slightly regretted not bringing some peanuts. Drinking without snacks always felt lacking.

Hengyuan nodded.

"Number Three pretended not to recognise me... With his intelligence, I'm sure he recognised me immediately. I wonder why he acted as if we were strangers."



Shaking his head, Chu Yuanzhen sighed, "Eighth Rank, Self-cultivator. His cultivation is a bit shallow."

However, he knew Number Three's secret. Number Three was linked to the clear aura rising to the sky from the Hall of the Lesser Sage, so one couldn't judge him by mere appearances.

Master Hengyuan took a sip of wine and pondered, "Compared to Number Three, I find myself more in tune with Sir Xu. You might not know, but he didn't die in Yunzhou..."

After Number Six explained the story of Xu Qi'an's miraculous survival, Chu Yuanzhen nodded. "The Pill of Rebirth is indeed potent, but its limitations are too great. His survival was due to his own luck.

"I just saw Xu Qi'an at the Jiaofangsi. I find him quite agreeable, perhaps because I've heard so much about him through the fragments of the Earth Book that he doesn't feel like a stranger."

After a pause, Number Four smiled, "I haven't spent much time with Number Three, but Xu Qi'an definitely suits my taste."

Finishing the jar of murky wine, Chu Yuanzhen suggested they visit the child. After seeing the child, his mood became somber.

"Though I don't like Buddhism, they do have a saying that rings true—this world is like a sea of suffering, and all beings struggle within it," Chu Yuanzhen lamented.

Master Hengyuan glanced at him.

Chu Yuanzhen quickly added, "No offense meant."

Only then did Hengyuan withdraw his gaze.

"In three days, it will be the second session of the imperial exam. Let's go see Number Three together," Hengyuan said. "Number Three does not wish to reveal his identity to us. He said that if we meet, a simple nod and smile will suffice."

"Ah, I see," Chu Yuanzhen said, understanding dawning.

...

Time passed swiftly, and three days later, the sky was just beginning to lighten as Xu Erlang arrived at the imperial examination hall, accompanied by his family.

"Confucians of the Ninth Rank have an eidetic memory. This round tests classics and doctrines, so Erlang should be under no pressure," Xu Qi'an said, patting his shoulder encouragingly.

Uncle Xu and Auntie both smiled.

According to Erlang, he had performed well on the first day's policy question exam. Since he excelled in policy discussions, he was confident about the classics portion as well.

In the eyes of Uncle Xu and Auntie, Erlang's path to becoming a successful scholar was nearly guaranteed.

Xu Xinnian raised his chin slightly, pride evident in his voice, "The world is full of talented scholars, and I must not let my guard down. There may still be those stronger than me."

\*May still be...\* Xu Qi'an thought, amused. \*No one boasts quite like you.\*

After bidding farewell to his family, Xu Xinnian walked towards the examination hall, ready to line up. Just then, a loud voice rang in his ears, "Amitufo."

Xu Xinnian turned his head and saw two figures standing by the street—a burly monk and a swordsman in an azure robe.

Seeing him look over, both the monk and the swordsman smiled mysteriously.

...Xu Xinnian's face stiffened, and he quickly lowered his head, hurrying back to the safety of his father and elder brother's side. A sense of security washed over him.

"Father, Big Brother, I suspect someone is plotting against me," Xu Xinnian said solemnly.

Upon hearing this, Xu Pingzhi's eyebrows shot up, his gaze sharp as a blade, "Who?"

As an officer of the Imperial Guard, he knew that recently, large numbers of jianghu wanderers had flooded into the capital, posing a significant threat to public order.

The most obvious sign was the increasing number of thieves. These rogue martial artists, having squandered their money in the capital, often turned to theft and robbery as their first recourse.

"A monk and a swordsman," Xu Xinnian replied, pointing to a spot behind them.

Xu Qi'an stared for a moment, then said, "Where? I don't see anyone."

"???"

Xu Xinnian's face filled with shock and fear, "They were just there!"

"Alright, alright. You say you're not stressed, but you're clearly seeing things," Xu Qi'an said, patting his little brother on the shoulder. "Erlang, remember, if you come across unfamiliar people acting strangely, don't engage with them."

As he spoke, he gave a light push on Xu Xinnian's back.

Xu Xinnian looked behind him, confused, "What's that supposed to mean, Big Brother?"

"Nothing, just making sure you're carrying your pot well," Xu Qi'an replied with a grin.

Chapter 266. Chu Yuanzhen: Do You Need Me to Withdraw

The beginning of Spring. Much wind, many rain.

A three-mast ship sailed through the waves, its sails billowing under the force of the wind.

After lunch, Song Tingfeng, with one hand resting on his sword, stepped onto the deck and gazed northward toward the capital.

Over the course of more than a month, the fires of war had sharpened the contours of his face, and the bloodshed had honed his gaze. His entire demeanor had changed significantly.

Footsteps approached from behind. Without turning around, Song Tingfeng pointed north and said, "In about ten days, we'll reach the capital."

Zhu Guangxiao grunted in acknowledgment and stood beside Song Tingfeng, also looking north. He remained as silent and taciturn as ever, though his aura had become more steady and grounded. Other than that, he hadn't changed much.

On the other hand, the once glib and slick Song Tingfeng seemed like a different person altogether.

"With the military achievements I earned in Yunzhou, I can exchange them for a Refining Spirit realm visualisation image...." Song Tingfeng smiled. "I'm planning to advance to the Refining Spirit realm."

In the past, Zhu Guangxiao would have been surprised. After all, they had been colleagues for years, and he knew Song Tingfeng lacked ambition. Reaching the rank of Bronze Gong had already satisfied him—patrolling the streets by day, visiting the Jiaofangsi by night, living a carefree life.

The military merits he had earned in Yunzhou were enough to let him live in the Jiaofangsi for a whole year if he converted them into silver.

"Mm."

Zhu Guangxiao nodded.

At that moment, another group of Bronze Gongs who had just finished their meal came out onto the deck to enjoy the breeze, laughing and chatting, their faces full of joy and anticipation at the thought of returning home.

"Tingfeng, once we're back in the capital, let's go to the Jiaofangsi for a drink," one of the familiar Bronze Gongs came over, putting an arm around Song Tingfeng's shoulder.

Song Tingfeng acted as though he hadn't heard and continued to silently look north.

The Bronze Gong, sensing no interest, walked away feeling awkward.

Song Tingfeng exhaled a long breath and said, "My natural ability is decent. I've been stuck at the peak of the Refining Qi realm for years now, and my foundations are solid enough. By the end of the year, advancing to the Refining Spirit realm shouldn't be difficult.

"This whole time, I've been thinking: What if I hadn't been so lazy? What if I weren't so useless? What if I had already been at the Refining Spirit realm when I went to Yunzhou...."

Lowering his head, Song Tingfeng murmured softly, "I'm not going to the Jiaofangsi anymore. Never again."

Zhu Guangxiao said nothing, only patting him on the shoulder.

...

The imperial exams proceeded in an orderly fashion. At first, Uncle Xu and Xu Qi'an were quite concerned about Xu Erlang's condition, constantly asking about his well-being, just as Xu Qi'an's parents had fussed over him back during his own high school exams.

However, the increasing chaos in public security soon left Xu Pingzhi, a Baihu Captain in the Imperial Guard, and Xu Qi'an, a Nightwatcher, both swamped with work.

The people of the Jianghu liked to prove their strength. While some were true heroes who upheld justice, more often than not, they were riffraff from the lower echelons of society. No respectable person would voluntarily mix in the Jianghu.

Once they ran out of money, they would target disreputable wealthy families, and if they could help a few impoverished souls struggling to get by, they'd consider themselves righteous thieves.

True heroes like Li Miaozen, who genuinely sought to aid the world and uphold justice, were a rare breed.

In just four or five days, Xu Qi'an alone had apprehended several drunken brawlers from out of town. According to Uncle Xu, thieves were caught in the outer city every night, though the inner city remained peaceful.

This was because the inner city had a curfew. The capital's five guard divisions patrolled the streets at night, and if they encountered someone traveling after dark, they would sound a warning with their bows. If the person chose to flee, they would be shot on sight.

For those suspicious individuals walking on rooftops, there was no need for a warning. The patrols had the authority to kill first and report later.

For minor offenders causing trouble, they were usually thrown into jail, awaiting bail from their comrades. These petty crimes were the most bothersome.

One day, Xu Qi'an was patrolling the streets with two Bronze Gongs. As they passed a brothel, the sound of roof tiles breaking suddenly caught their attention.

Looking up, they saw two jianghu men fighting fiercely on the rooftop.

A crowd had gathered below, pointing and shouting, some cheering, others jeering.

"Damn it, these bastards are still causing trouble even after we confiscated their weapons." Xu Qi'an cursed and ordered the Bronze Gongs beside him, "Go, bring them down and take them all back to the constabulary."

Since there were civilians watching, it wasn't appropriate to sound the gongs, as the sonic waves of the enchanted instruments could harm the bystanders.

The two Bronze Gongs leaped up and shouted, "Fighting is prohibited in the inner city. Come with us to the constabulary."

This was their way of warning the fighters not to resist, similar to the sounding of a bow.

However, the two warriors were too caught up in the heat of battle to care. Once a martial artist's blood was roused, they didn't care who was standing in front of them—even government officials were fair game.

One of the Bronze Gongs barely dodged a vicious kick aimed at his groin, and enraged, he drew his sword with a clang, channeling his Qi and slashing downward.

Though Bronze Gongs were the lowest rank of Nightwatchers, those in the Refining Qi realm were still formidable fighters in the Jianghu. Ordinary Jianghu warriors were no match for them.

Clang!

A burst of Qi from below deflected the Bronze Gong's blade.

The Jianghu man who had narrowly escaped death instinctively gave it his all, kicking the Bronze Gong in the chest. The Bronze Gong tumbled from the roof but managed to perform a neat backflip, landing steadily.

Xu Qi'an narrowed his eyes, his thumb flicking the black-gold long knife.

Sensing his killing intent, someone in the crowd shouted, "Stop!"

The shout came from a group of well-dressed outsiders, including some young noblemen and a few strikingly beautiful female warriors. Behind them stood some older men and elders.

At their master's command, the two martial artists ceased their fight.

Xu Qi'an, hand on his sword, walked over with a swagger that showed he feared no one.

"Officer, my name is Lu Chun, of the Lu family of Jingzhou." A handsome young man in white, elegant attire cupped his hands in greeting.

Several of the beautiful women in the group cast interested glances at Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an nodded and turned to the other group. "And you?"

The leader of that group, a man with a sinister aura, snorted coldly. The old man beside him quickly answered, "Reporting to this official, we are from the Zhao family of Jingzhou."

The Lu and Zhao families were renowned in Jingzhou, each with powerful members both in officialdom and the Jianghu. They held sway over both black and white.

In more straightforward terms, they were local gentry. In fact, families like the Lu and Zhao clans had grown far beyond the scope of typical gentry—they lived lives of extreme wealth and luxury.

In Jingzhou, the two families were bitter rivals. They fought each other both in the courts and on the battlefield, their feud spanning generations.

By chance, they had encountered each other on the streets of the capital.

The two sides exchanged a few sarcastic remarks, anger simmering between them. But they managed to restrain themselves, sending only two of their trained experts to the rooftop to duel.

Although disturbing the peace violated the law, since no innocent bystanders were hurt and no significant damage was caused, both families had enough power to easily smooth things over.

"Who released their Qi earlier?" Xu Qi'an scanned the crowd.

The delicate-looking young man with an air of arrogance tilted his chin up. "It was me."

Xu Qi'an slowly nodded, his gaze sweeping over both groups. "Alright, all of you are coming with me to the Nightwatcher constabulary."

The handsome young man from the Lu family frowned slightly.

"What?"

The delicate young man sneered, "We didn't fight in the street. You can take those two back to constabulary."

Xu Qi'an spat back, "I said you're coming, so you're coming. You keep yapping, and I'll cut you down right here."

Merely Attacking Nightwatchers was enough to put your head on the block. These outsiders were far too arrogant.

"On what grounds? Under the Emperor's rule, even you Nightwatchers have to follow the law," the delicate man retorted, unafraid.

Clang!

Xu Qi'an's black-gold sabre left its sheath, a dark golden flash came and went.

Before the delicate man could react, he was nearly sent to the Yellow Springs. But a graceful woman standing beside him was quicker, pulling a silver hairpin from her head and blocking the sword Qi.

Bang!

The hairpin shattered, and the sword Qi sliced into her delicate hand.

Xu Qi'an leapt forward, kicking the woman aside. As she flew back, he delivered a spinning kick to the delicate man, sending him crashing to the ground.

That kick used hidden force, enough to severely damage the man's internal organs without breaking any bones.

Ignoring the fallen man, Xu Qi'an pointed his long sword forward and sneered, "Even a Bronze Skin Iron Bones cannot leave the capital unless I say so."

The old man's face turned ashen as he looked down at his chest.

Xu Qi'an turned to the Lu family. "Are you coming or not?"

The members of the Lu family glanced at the old man's chest, where a faint red stain had started to seep through.

The Bronze Skin and Iron Bones... was broken.

They now re-evaluated Xu Qi'an. This young Silver Gong was already impressive just for his rank at such a young age, but to casually defeat a Refining Spirit expert like the Zhao family's young lady and easily break through the defences of someone in the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage? His cultivation was terrifying, and his talent even more so.

This was the capital, after all. Even a random Silver Gong here could be considered a prodigy elsewhere.

"We'll follow the officer's orders," the handsome young man from the Lu family said, not daring to defy him.

...

After escorting the two groups back to the constabulary, Xu Qi'an found a clerk and said, "For these two groups, make each person pay one hundred taels of silver. Not a single coin less."

"Three hundred taels go on record. Fifty taels you and the others can split. As for the two Bronze Gongs who patrolled with me, give them fifty taels each. The rest, bring to me at Spring Wind Hall tomorrow."

"Understood. I'll make sure it's handled," the clerk quickly assured him.

Satisfied, Xu Qi'an nodded and then headed to the stables to fetch his beloved mare. Mounting up, he rode off in the direction of the Imperial City.

The sun was high in the sky, and he planned to stop by Lingbao Temple for lunch and ask Luo Yuheng for advice on the \_Heart Sword\_ technique.

He had already gotten the basics of the technique, and to him, it wasn't particularly difficult. The key was attaching spiritual energy to the sword, similar to infusing it with Qi.

The tricky part was smoothly blending the two forces.

It was like drawing a circle with one hand—easy enough on its own—but when using both hands at the same time, the brain would struggle to keep up. Oftentimes, his sword strikes would falter, either forgetting to channel Qi or to apply spiritual power.

Now that he was a Silver Gong, Xu Qi'an had free access to the Imperial City. Flashing his token, the guards let him pass without issue.

Arriving at Lingbao Temple, a young Daoist boy went to announce his presence. Soon after, the boy returned.

"The Daoist Leader is expecting you."

Xu Qi'an nodded and followed the boy through the corridors, finally arriving at a quiet meditation room where his "kind aunt" Luo Yuheng awaited him.

But she wasn't alone. A swordsman in an azure robe, exuding a carefree aura with a single white lock of hair at his forehead, sat cross-legged on a cushion beside her. The streak of white in his hair only added to his mature and charismatic appearance.

\*Damn, Number Four is here too...\* Xu Qi'an thought immediately.

\*Damn, Luo Yuheng knows I'm the holder of a fragment of the Earth Book...\* was his second thought.

"National Teacher!" Xu Qi'an kept his face expressionless and bowed in greeting.

Then he smiled at Chu Yuanzhen, the number one scholar. "Master Zhuangyuan!"

Chu Yuanzhen smiled back, looking surprised to see Xu Qi'an there. After all, someone of Xu Qi'an's rank wasn't typically allowed into Lingbao Temple to meet with the Daoist leader.

"How do you know the National Teacher?" Chu Yuanzhen asked, voicing his curiosity.

Luo Yuheng was about to answer when—

\_Cough cough...\_

Xu Qi'an coughed forcefully, desperately trying to signal her with his thoughts. But his mental transmission was blocked.

He tried again, and again his thoughts were pushed back.

A third time, and his "kind aunt" once more denied the private conversation.

Luo Yuheng's message was clear: \_We're not that close. Don't DM me.\_

Attempting to communicate telepathically with someone like the National Teacher was clearly overstepping... Xu Qi'an grew a bit anxious.

Chu Yuanzhen glanced between Xu Qi'an and Luo Yuheng, then smiled. "Do you need me to withdraw for a moment?"

Xu Qi'an felt a bit embarrassed.

## Chapter 267. Xu Qi'an's Ultimate Skill

Fortunately, Luo Yuheng, the dignified second-rank Daoist leader, didn't care much about Xu Qi'an's little schemes, nor was she interested in answering Chu Yuanzhen's question. Her intelligent eyes glanced at Xu Qi'an and said indifferently, "What is it?"

"I encountered some difficulties while practicing the 'Heart Sword' technique. I would like to seek guidance from the National Teacher," Xu Qi'an respectfully replied.

"Indeed, the 'Heart Sword' is difficult to master," Luo Yuheng nodded and said, "Yuanzhen, assist me in guiding Sir Xu. I must meet the Emperor."

\*The Emperor? Is that old man Emperor Yuanjing coming here too...? Daoist Leader, my 'Heart Sword' has already been mastered. I'm not here to ask about the multiplication table, I'm here for calculus...\* Xu Qi'an silently complained.

The reason he didn't voice his thoughts was because Luo Yuheng's figure had vanished. The door didn't open, nor did the windows. This woman had simply disappeared from the meditation room before his eyes.

"What kind of supernatural power is that?" Xu Qi'an muttered enviously.

"It's not a supernatural power," Chu Yuanzhen shook his head and explained, "That was just a fragment of the Daoist Leader's consciousness. She merely retracted it."

\*The methods of high-rank experts are god-like...\*

Xu Qi'an was able to enter Lingbao Temple today mainly because Zhong Li, that unlucky girl, had to return to the Sitianjian for some errand. Otherwise, with her in tow, entering the temple would have been impossible, and leaving her outside, she would likely suffer some sort of calamity — or more likely, some disaster would befall the entire Imperial City.

For instance, if the Spirit dragon suddenly went berserk and wreaked havoc in the Imperial City.

Ever since returning to the capital from Yunzhou, Xu Qi'an had frequently entered the Imperial City to investigate cases, but he hadn't once visited the spirit dragon. This mythical beast held too much symbolic significance for the royal family, and Xu Qi'an dared not approach it. If word spread that the spirit dragon had become his lapdog, he might lose his head.

"The 'Heart Sword' is indeed challenging, especially for a martial artist unfamiliar with the domain of the Primordial Spirit..." Chu Yuanzhen was about to explain the mysteries of the 'Heart Sword', but just as he began, he was interrupted by Xu Qi'an.

"Brother Chu, I'm sorry for the misunderstanding," Xu Qi'an said with restraint. "I've already understood the basics of the 'Heart Sword'."

Chu Yuanzhen nodded, not paying much attention, and asked, "How long have you been practicing it?"

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment. "About ten days."

Chu Yuanzhen froze, carefully examining Xu Qi'an before saying in a calm tone, "Don't joke around."



Mastering the 'Heart Sword' in ten days—what kind of Primordial Spirit would that require? Even a disciple practicing Daoist techniques wouldn't dare claim to master it in such a short time.

"I never joke," Xu Qi'an smiled slightly.

"Your talent is astonishing, Sir Xu. It's a pity you don't cultivate the methods of the Human Sect," Chu Yuanzhen said in surprise.

\*Please, don't start thinking along those lines, or the Human Sect might also curse: "Xu Pingzhi is despicable!"\*

\*My poor, innocent uncle.\*

...

Chu Yuanzhen was a man of restrained arrogance. He possessed the integrity of a scholar and the unbridled nature of a swordsman, but he never let these traits show in his words.

\*Compared to the proud and aloof Xu Erlang, Number Four seems more like a seasoned and mature socialite...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

Of course, a seasoned socialite isn't necessarily calm and composed. Xu Qi'an himself was an example. He understood the ways of the world, yet still enjoyed witty banter, much like the young man in his past life who loved to splurge on QQ microtransactions—some things never change.

"What does Brother Chu think of the differences between Jiaofangsi across various regions of the Great Feng?"

The discussion was clearly meant to be serious and professional, yet Xu Qi'an suddenly interjected with a casual question. Chu Yuanzhen, though a bit puzzled, still answered truthfully:

"After abandoning the scholarly path and committing to Daoism, I have not stayed overnight at any Jiaofangsi."

The implication was clear: I've taken a vow of celibacy.

Soon after, Xu Qi'an asked again, "The time for the Daoist debate draws near. What is your opinion of Li Miaozen of the Heaven Sect?"

Chu Yuanzhen pondered and then said, "She has a chivalrous heart, and I greatly respect her."

\*Damn, no slip-ups...\* Xu Qi'an smiled, "Let's continue."

But shortly after, Xu Qi'an, once again interrupting, asked, "Brother Chu, the National Teacher suffers greatly from karmic fire. Do you also endure such torment?"

Chu Yuanzhen was startled, "How did you know that?"

Xu Qi'an quickly patched up his lie, "Duke Wei mentioned it to me."

\*Ah, that makes sense. Wei Yuan did take great care in mentoring him, treating him as a confidant...\* Chu Yuanzhen nodded, accepting the explanation as reasonable.

After all, Number One had once said that Xu Qi'an was highly regarded by Wei Yuan.

"I only practice the sword techniques of the Human Sect, not their mental methods."

"What do you mean?" Xu Qi'an didn't understand.

"In the martial arts system, I would be at the Refining Spirit stage, but I primarily practice the Human Sect's Heart Sword, Qi Sword, and Sword Control techniques."

"Then how do you advance? What's the next rank?"

The three sword techniques were methods of combat, not a foundational system, meaning that Chu Yuanzhen wasn't following the Daoist system but was instead using the martial system as his base, primarily focusing on Human Sect sword techniques.

"I don't know."

Chu Yuanzhen was carefree, adopting a 'cross the bridge when I get there' attitude: "The path lies ahead; I'll walk it when the time comes."

"Let's continue discussing the practical applications of the 'Heart Sword'..."

Initially, the conversation centered around the 'Heart Sword'. Gradually, however, Chu Yuanzhen realised that Xu Qi'an's understanding of cultivation was quite shallow, far below what someone at the Refining Spirit stage should possess.

\*Oh, right. After the Tax Silver Case in October last year, he was still at the Refining Vitality stage... In just half a year, he skyrocketed to become a seventh-rank martial artist. His talent is truly frightening...\*

Chu Yuanzhen recalled Xu Qi'an's information.

With this realisation, his curiosity piqued, and he eagerly said, "Talking theory is quite boring, Sir Xu. How about we spar a bit?"

He enjoyed sparring with geniuses, observing their strengths and absorbing their insights.

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, realising this was a good opportunity to gauge Number Four's abilities. He nodded, "Alright, but Brother Chu, please remember to go easy on me."

...

On the other side, Emperor Yuanjing and Luo Yuheng sat facing each other, with a steaming pot of tea placed on the table between them.

"That child from the Heaven Sect is coming to the capital. Does Chu Yuanzhen have the confidence to defeat her?"

Emperor Yuanjing sipped his tea, the rising steam slightly obscuring his face.

"Hard to say."

Luo Yuheng, holding her own cup, maintained a cool expression. "Although Li Miaozen is fifth rank, she's quite likely to use this opportunity to step into the fourth rank Nascent Soul stage. If Chu Yuanzhen doesn't draw his sword, it's hard to predict the outcome."

"Either way, they are both outstanding talents. It has been a long time since anyone in my Great Feng caught our attention," Emperor Yuanjing said with a sigh.

"What does Your Majesty mean? Chu Yuanzhen was the \*zhuangyuan\* in the twenty-seventh year of Yuanjing," the female national teacher chuckled lightly.

Emperor Yuanjing shook his head. Chu Yuanzhen had abandoned his official position, becoming a mere wandering swordsman, no longer under the court's command.

It was rather strange. In the past decade, not only had the Great Feng's national strength gradually declined, but the emergence of talented individuals had also dwindled. Especially in recent years, Emperor Yuanjing had not encountered any promising young people to his satisfaction.

"What is the national teacher's plan for dealing with the Heaven Sect Daoist leader?" Emperor Yuanjing asked, shifting the conversation.

He clearly wasn't concerned about Li Miaozen's arrival specifically. His worry lay in the upcoming conflict of Heaven and Man.

"The last time the conflict of Heaven and Man occurred, the Daoist leader of Heaven Sect had yet to step into the First rank. Your father fought him to a standstill, with no clear winner," Emperor Yuanjing said sombrely.

As he spoke, his gaze grew sharp, lingering on Luo Yuheng's refined and ethereal beauty, his meaning unmistakably clear.

\*Dual cultivation was a mutually beneficial arrangement, far from the sinister techniques of leeching the other party's vitality.\*

If Luo Yuheng wanted to make rapid progress in a short period, dual cultivation with him was her only viable option.

At that moment, a sudden wave of powerful qi fluctuation disrupted Emperor Yuanjing and Luo Yuheng's conversation.

There was a fight within Lingbao Temple?

This was the first time Emperor Yuanjing had encountered such an occurrence.

Luo Yuheng sensed it briefly and smiled faintly.

"National teacher, what's going on?" Emperor Yuanjing frowned.

"It's Chu Yuanzhen sparring with Xu Qi'an," Luo Yuheng explained.

Hearing the name "Xu Qi'an," Emperor Yuanjing looked puzzled. He couldn't comprehend how this lowly Bronze Gong could have ended up at Lingbao Temple, much less how he got involved in anything related to the temple.

Luo Yuheng elaborated, "His cultivation technique is somewhat unique. Wei Yuan brought him here to learn some swordsmanship, so I taught him a couple moves."

Both the national teacher and Wei Yuan had successfully shifted the pot onto each other for their respective protégés.

Emperor Yuanjing nodded, accepting this explanation. After sensing the battle for a moment, he was slightly astonished. "Xu Qi'an can actually hold his own against Chu Yuanzhen?"

Luo Yuheng, now tired of his repeated attempts to convince her to dual cultivate, promptly suggested, "If Your Majesty is interested, why not accompany me to watch the fight?"

Emperor Yuanjing thought for a moment. "Very well."

The two left the tea room side by side, walking through a garden, across two winding corridors, and arrived at the other end of Lingbao Temple. From a distance, they could see Xu Qi'an and Chu Yuanzhen fiercely engaged in battle within a small garden.

\_Clang! Clang! Clang!\_

Xu Qi'an's black-gold saber whirled around, creating an impenetrable defense as it deflected the branches that continuously shot at him. Each collision reverberated like muffled thunder, sending waves of energy rippling through the air.

Several tree branches darted through the garden, attacking Xu Qi'an from various angles. Chu Yuanzhen stood atop a rockery with his hands behind his back, smiling slightly and occasionally nodding, seemingly quite impressed with Xu Qi'an's combat abilities.

But in truth, Chu Yuanzhen was more surprised than anything else.

Although he was only using his Sword Control technique, the fact that Xu Qi'an could hold his ground in the face of so many "flying swords," all without showing any flaws, was astonishing. Especially considering Xu Qi'an had only just entered the Refining Spirit stage—this indicated that his mental faculties were exceptionally strong.

Chu Yuanzhen was starting to believe that Xu Qi'an had indeed grasped the basics of the "Heart Sword" technique in just ten days.

Emperor Yuanjing, stunned by this scene, was taken aback. In his mind, Xu Qi'an had always been a minor figure known for his investigative skills. He had first heard of him during the Tax Silver Case, when Xu Qi'an was still just a low-ranking fast bailiff in Chang'an County's law enforcement.

After that, Xu Qi'an rose higher and higher, solving major cases like the Sangbo Incident, earning Emperor Yuanjing's approval. But this was all unrelated to martial prowess. To Emperor Yuanjing, Xu Qi'an was a capable investigator, not a warrior.

Seeing him now, fiercely fighting against Chu Yuanzhen, left Emperor Yuanjing astonished.

It was as if he were watching a bookish scholar from the Hanlin Academy suddenly brandish a spear and charge into battle.

"National teacher..."

Emperor Yuanjing stared at the courtyard and couldn't help but ask, "What is Xu Qi'an's cultivation level?"

"Refining Spirit," Luo Yuheng responded calmly.

\*Refining Spirit...\* Emperor Yuanjing nodded in realisation. From his perspective, a Refining Spirit martial artist was nothing remarkable and didn't warrant much attention.

Still, for someone who had been a lowly fast bailiff in Chang'an County just half a year ago to reach this stage wasn't too bad.

Yet, with Chu Yuanzhen as the benchmark, Xu Qi'an's accomplishments paled in comparison. Watching the two of them spar now, it was clear: one was relaxed, the other struggling to keep up.

The difference in skill was evident.

"The Human Sect's swordsmanship is unparalleled. Such divine techniques can toy with a martial artist at will," Emperor Yuanjing sighed.

"Silver Gong Xu is not bad either. Your Majesty just mentioned the lack of promising new talents in the Great Feng court. I believe this Silver Gong Xu is quite the outstanding talent," Luo Yuheng said with a smile.

Her comment, however, only reinforced Emperor Yuanjing's perception. In his eyes, Chu Yuanzhen was the true genius, and Xu Qi'an merely the supporting character.

Frowning, Emperor Yuanjing remarked, "His techniques are too lacking. Didn't you say you taught Xu Qi'an swordsmanship?"

"I taught him the Heart Sword technique. The intricacies of the Human Sect swordsmanship take time to grasp, and even mastering the basics is not something that can be done overnight," Luo Yuheng explained.

"Still, it's barely satisfactory..."

Emperor Yuanjing shook his head, his impression of Xu Qi'an's talent now more firmly established. Stronger than the average person, yes—but far from a true prodigy.

...

At this moment, Xu Qi'an, trapped within the sword formation, felt immense pressure. Dozens of tree branches, like sharp flying swords, whistled toward him, infused with powerful Qi.

Although Xu Qi'an had already reached the Refining Spirit stage, allowing him to detect all hostile and killing intent in his surroundings, automatically feeding the information to his mind, he still struggled. No matter how sharp his senses were, he only had two arms and a single blade, making it difficult to fend off all the attacks.

\*So, the next level is Bronze Skin and Iron Bones, specifically designed to counter overwhelming assaults... The martial artist's path truly symbolises personal might...\*

Xu Qi'an had gained a deeper understanding of the martial artist system. Each stage compensated for a previous weakness, and if someone could reach the Martial God realm, they would likely be invincible.

\_Shhrrip...\_

A tree branch grazed Xu Qi'an's armpit, tearing his uniform.

As time passed, more of these "stray fish" slipped through his defences.

Xu Qi'an had at least three ways to resolve the current predicament. The first was the final strategy from the \_Thirty-Six Stratagems\_.[^1]

The second was to use the Confucian version of a spellbook, which recorded several techniques specifically designed to counter encirclements.

The third option was to ignore his own injuries and unleash a One Blade from Heaven and Earth at Chu Yuanzhen.

But since this was just a sparring session, the first two options were unnecessary, and the third was a life-risking move that would defeat the purpose of a friendly duel.

\*Something's off... No matter how smoothly the Qi flows, there should still be some inertia when the flying swords change direction... Yet Number Four's flying swords move flawlessly, defying the laws of physics. Doesn't Newton get any respect? Oh, wait... this isn't Newton's domain...\*

Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment and came to a realisation.

He swung his black-gold sabre, fending off six branches in front of him, and concentrated his mental energy, channelling it into the blade.

He spun around and slashed. As the dark-gold blade collided with the incoming tree branches, Xu Qi'an suddenly grasped the technique of dispersing mental energy upon impact.

\_Buzz...\_ Invisible mental power radiated outward in a fan shape, enveloping the flying swords behind him.

The tree branches paused slightly, then losing some kind of invisible support, fell limply to the ground.

\_It worked...\_ Xu Qi'an felt a surge of joy in his heart. Using the same technique, he sprayed his mental energy forward, cutting down all the remaining flying swords.

With that, he broke through Chu Yuanzhen's sword formation.

"How did you figure out that my mental power was attached to the flying swords?" Chu Yuanzhen asked, surprised.

\_Phew...\_

\*Because I actually paid attention in middle school physics...\* Xu Qi'an leaned on his saber, panting as he looked at the \*zhuangyuan\* on the rockery. "This is probably... just natural talent."

Outside the courtyard, Emperor Yuanjing nodded slightly. He turned his head to glance at Luo Yuheng, the National Teacher. A trace of surprise flashed across his face when he saw her stunning features.

"National Teacher?"

Luo Yuheng withdrew her gaze and praised, "This young man has extraordinary talent."

"What do you mean by that?"

Emperor Yuanjing rarely saw the National Teacher give such high praise to a junior. Although she had complimented Xu Qi'an earlier, it was mostly out of courtesy. Now, however, it was genuine admiration, which piqued the emperor's interest.

"I mentioned to Your Majesty earlier that I taught Silver Gong Xu the technique of the \_Heart Sword\_. That was a mere ten days ago."

After Luo Yuheng spoke, she noticed Emperor Yuanjing showed no particular reaction, so she explained further, "The threshold for the \_Heart Sword\_ is incredibly high. Even for the most outstanding disciples of the Human Sect, it typically takes six months to a year to grasp the basics."

With this clarification, Emperor Yuanjing understood.

Xu Qi'an had only taken ten days.

Emperor Yuanjing looked over at Chu Yuanzhen on the rockery. "And what about him?"

"Like Xu Qi'an, he learned the Human Sect sword technique as a martial artist. It took Chu Yuanzhen one month."

The emperor's smile began to widen, but then Luo Yuheng added, "One month to master the basics of three sword techniques simultaneously."

The emperor fell silent again. At this moment, he heard Chu Yuanzhen laughing, "What's your trump card?"

"My trump card?" Xu Qi'an echoed.

"Indeed. From start to finish, you haven't used your ultimate technique. Without revealing something special, this duel would be too dull," Chu Yuanzhen said.

"Well..." Xu Qi'an hesitated, then said:

"You're about to face Li Miaozen soon. I fear I might accidentally injure you and affect the conflict of Heaven and Man."

This was an undeniably arrogant statement. Both Luo Yuheng and Emperor Yuanjing shifted their gazes from the \*zhuangyuan\* to Xu Qi'an.

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#### Chapter 268. Number Five's Message

Chu Yuanzhen's eyes brightened. Instead of getting angry, he smiled expectantly and said, "Our sparring earlier was rather dull. If you have any ultimate skills, feel free to use them."

Xu Qi'an nodded and added, "I'll only use one move. After that, our sparring will be over."

This was to prevent Chu Yuanzhen from retaliating after taking a strike and turning Xu into a human pincushion. Otherwise: \*Xu Qi'an, deceased, twenty years of age.\*

Chu Yuanzhen pondered for a moment and asked, "After you use this move, will you enter a weakened state?"

\*As smart as expected of a zhuangyuan, quick-witted...\* Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly and nodded, "Yes."

"What move is it?"

Emperor Yuanjing, who overheard the conversation, looked towards Luo Yuheng beside him.

Luo Yuheng shook her head. She actually knew, but didn't want to waste her breath explaining to Emperor Yuanjing.

Her calm and indifferent demeanour made Emperor Yuanjing secretly frown. As the ruler of a vast empire, with the power of life and death over his subjects, he felt powerless in front of this woman. He had long desired to dual cultivate with the National Teacher to achieve immortality, but every time he brought it up, Luo Yuheng would either ignore or evade the topic.

Before this Daoist leader, he felt like a poor young man with little to offer, which deeply frustrated him.

\_Clang!\_

In the garden, Xu Qi'an sheathed his black-gold sabre.

He then stepped forward, his knees slightly bent, and placed his right hand on the hilt, preparing for a drawing technique.

His breath steady, his emotions calmed, he was like the coastline before a tsunami, pulling in all his energy.

Chu Yuanzhen's expression grew solemn. With a flick of his fingers, he summoned a branch and held it as a sword.

\_Clang!\_

At the moment Xu Qi'an's thumb flicked his black-gold sabre, he visualised a roaring golden lion in his mind. With a thunderous roar, the blade flashed out.

Chu Yuanzhen's ears rang as if a lightning bolt had exploded overhead. In that instant, a thin line of saber energy flashed by.

At the critical moment, the zhuangyuan leisurely extended his branch.

\_Boom!\_

The moment the branch touched the sabre energy, a violent shockwave swept through the entire garden. The rockery under Chu Yuanzhen's feet exploded first, followed by the pavilion behind him, its four pillars snapping and its roof flying into the sky.

The once calm pool erupted in waves, ready to collapse the meditation room behind them. Luo Yuheng parted her red lips and softly uttered, "Halt!"

The violent shockwave instantly froze and then disappeared.

In the garden, Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged, his saber resting across his knees, looking exhausted.

Chu Yuanzhen's sleeve was shredded, revealing his muscular forearm. He clenched and unclenched his fist several times to ease the pain, then sighed, "Impressive, truly impressive... If you were at the fifth rank, this strike would have severely injured me."

\*Damn it, I gave it my all, and all I managed to do was cut through air...\* Xu Qi'an silently complained, raising his head and imitating Xu Erlang's indifferent expression, saying, "It's no wonder you're capable of duelling with Li Miaozhen. I admit defeat."

\*Xu Qi'an was also a proud man, no less so than the scholars of Cloud Deer Academy...\* Chu Yuanzhen smiled and nodded.

Emperor Yuanjing glanced at the garden and then turned to Luo Yuheng. The stunningly beautiful National Teacher was gazing steadily at Xu Qi'an.

Seeing this, Emperor Yuanjing smiled broadly, saying, "Chu Yuanzhen is indeed a remarkable disciple of the Human Sect. His cultivation is impressive. Xu Qi'an still has a long way to go, but after all, he's just a Silver Gong. There's room for improvement."



Though it seemed like he was praising Chu Yuanzhen and belittling Xu Qi'an, it was actually the opposite. A mere Silver Gong had shredded Chu Yuanzhen's sleeve, and there were many such Silver Gongs in the Nightwatcher's Office.

Luo Yuheng forced a smile.

Emperor Yuanjing's mood lifted even more. He chuckled, "I still have matters to attend to in the palace. National Teacher, please see me off."

Luo Yuheng gestured for him to proceed.

At this moment, Xu Qi'an suddenly called out, "Your servant bids farewell to Your Majesty."

Chu Yuanzhen also bowed but said nothing.

Emperor Yuanjing and Luo Yuheng had no choice but to stop. The former gave Xu Qi'an a rare approving nod and said, "An impressive duel. Xu Qi'an, your talent is commendable. Do not disappoint the court's expectations."

Xu Qi'an responded smoothly, "Thank you for Your Majesty's guidance. Your servant shall serve with utmost loyalty until my last breath."

Emperor Yuanjing nodded in satisfaction and left with Luo Yuheng.

\*Empty praises with no real reward...\* Xu Qi'an watched their departing figures and pouted.

Once they were out of sight, Chu Yuanzhen said, "Wait a moment, Brother Xu. I'll go change clothes."

He then turned and entered the meditation room.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and Chu Yuanzhen called out, "Brother Xu, come in for some tea."

Xu Qi'an stepped over the threshold to see Chu Yuanzhen seated at the table, now wearing a light-coloured robe. The tattered azure one was nowhere to be seen.

"Hmm, where did you get those clothes? What happened to the azure one?" Xu Qi'an pretended to look around.

"I have a storage artefact," Chu Yuanzhen explained warmly as he poured tea.

\*...uhh... I was about to say: Wow, Brother Chu, is this the legendary Sleeve Universe technique? Who's this honest, huh? You're even more straightforward than Li Miaozen!\* Xu Qi'an grumbled inwardly, but his expression remained unchanged as he asked, "Can I take a look?"

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head, "The elder who gifted it to me instructed that I must not show it to others."

Even his rejection was frank and aboveboard.

"No problem, no problem," Xu Qi'an said regretfully.

Similarly, Daoist Jinlian had warned him not to show his treasures lightly, especially to guard against Daoists of the Earth Sect. Although the sect had splintered long ago, its foundation was still formidable.

One mustn't be careless.

"Brother Chu, you're not a student of Cloud Deer Academy, are you?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"I studied there once but later moved to the Imperial College." Chu Yuanzhen didn't hide anything, exhaling, "In my youth, I was full of ambition, brimming with talent, and wanted to serve the empire. Knowing that scholars from Cloud Deer Academy weren't valued in the court, I left for the Imperial College."

"Why did you resign from your position later?"

"Because a scholar's talents are of little use. Literature can't save the Great Feng, so I resigned and wandered the world with my sword," Chu Yuanzhen sighed.

\*I know a guy who thought studying medicine couldn't save the country, so he switched to writing instead...\* Xu Qi'an slapped the table in admiration, "How carefree!"

\*No wonder Chu Yuanzhen had merely bowed politely when he saw Emperor Yuanjing without saying a word...\* He had noticed this detail earlier. Linking it together now, it seemed that what truly disillusioned Chu Yuanzhen was this very Emperor obsessed with cultivation.

As they sipped tea and chatted, it was mostly Chu Yuanzhen talking, sharing stories of his travels over the years.

"Though the Northern Barbarians only number a million, and one of our provinces alone holds tens of millions of people, for centuries they have remained a persistent thorn in our side. Do you know why?"

"It's because the Northern Barbarians carry the bloodline of ancient gods and demons."

"Ancient gods and demons?" Xu Qi'an asked, confused.

"It is said that when the world was first created, a group of gods and demons with the power to move mountains, fill seas, pluck stars, and snatch the moon were born. Later, they mysteriously went extinct. The Northern Barbarians being called descendants of gods and demons isn't baseless. They are naturally endowed with strong physiques and immense strength. Occasionally, their tribes give birth to children displaying ancestral traits: scales on their skin, a single horn on their foreheads, massive serpentine tails, standing two metres tall by the age of three... These strange phenomena all serve to support this claim.

"The historians of the Great Feng have used these signs to speculate that during the dark ages, there must have been an era where gods and demons roamed freely. In that era, humans were as insignificant as ants, only able to survive by clinging to these deities, which is how the Northern Barbarians came to be.

"And we are the humans who rose to power later."

\*Hold on... don't deities and humans have reproductive isolation?\* Xu Qi'an silently grumbled in his mind but asked, "I suspect they might be hybrids of humans and \*yaoguai\*, rather than gods and demons. After all, the Northern Barbarians and the Northern Yao Tribes are allies."

Chu Yuanzhen pondered for a long moment before replying, "As for whether gods and demons truly exist, I once heard a theory that the Gu God, which slumbers in the Abyss of the Southern Marches, is a surviving ancient deity, and possibly the last of its kind."

\*The Gu God is an ancient deity? This might be something I can ask Five about...\* Xu Qi'an suddenly had a thought. "Hence during the battle of Shanhai Pass, the Southern and Northern Barbarians were allied?"

"That's a solid line of reasoning. We've always thought that the Northern and Southern Barbarians maintained a relatively friendly relationship simply because they were separated by the Great Feng, with both sides eyeing this great land like a coveted pie, making them natural allies. But it could also be that their shared heritage has kept them on good terms."

Chu Yuanzhen nodded, clearly excited. "If the historians knew of this theory, they'd be ecstatic."

The conversation continued.

"Beyond the Northern Barbarian lands, further north lies the northern extreme, where the cold is so severe it can freeze a person from the inside out. Yet, there are still signs of life. I once encountered a strange race with human heads and fish bodies. They possess intelligence but cannot speak human languages; they communicate through hand gestures.

"In their tribes, females outnumber males, and one male is often assigned multiple females for reproduction. Outside of mating, the males have no other duties, as the females handle hunting."

\*I am so jealous right now...\* Xu Qi'an thought.

"But due to overwork, the males often don't live past twenty years, and their offspring are mostly female."

\*This is why boys should preserve themselves, protect their virtue, and not let women lust after their bodies...\* Xu Qi'an thought.

"Every sixty years, their tribe faces the threat of extinction because all the males die off, leaving no one to impregnate the females... And coincidentally, I visited the far north during one such year."

Xu Qi'an was shocked. "And then you managed to get the females pregnant?"

"Pfft..." Chu Yuanzhen spat out his tea, spraying Xu Qi'an in the face.

"Why would you think that?" Chu Yuanzhen asked, passing him a handkerchief, still in shock.

"Uh... please continue," Xu Qi'an waved off the question, refusing to answer.

"That year, it was the males' extinction cycle. To ensure the survival of their race, some of the females transformed into males, courageously shouldering the burden of reproduction.

"Their queen was the first to undergo the transformation. It was her duty to do so. Once she became the king, she gathered her daughters into her harem."

Xu Qi'an was left speechless, his mind swirling with disbelief, sighing: "The wonders of creation truly leave one in awe."

After another fifteen minutes of conversation, Chu Yuanzhen laughed. "Enough about me. Brother Xu, you're quite the celebrity in the capital now. Your illustrious deeds are surely the talk of the town, eagerly discussed in teahouses and taverns alike."

He leaned in with interest. "Why don't you share some of those cases with me?"

"This is going to be a long story..." Xu Qi'an adjusted his posture. "Let me start with the case of the stolen tax silver. When my second uncle was implicated in the missing silver, he knew his days were numbered, and that he had dragged down others with him. Upon learning this, I told him, 'Second Uncle, fear not, this case is riddled with flaws. In my eyes, it's nothing more than a minor trick. I'll solve it within a single incense stick's worth of time.'

"However, I must admit, I was too young and arrogant at the time, underestimating the heroes of the world."

"Oh? What do you mean by that?" Chu Yuanzhen asked, intrigued.

"It actually took me two incense sticks of time to solve the tax silver case."

...

Xu Qi'an then recounted the series of cases, from the tax silver to the Imperial Consort's affair. Chu Yuanzhen sat with his teacup, not drinking a drop, listening intently, engrossed in the tale.

Whenever he encountered something puzzling, his brow furrowed in confusion, only to smile in realisation when Xu Qi'an explained the details.

"Brother Xu, you are truly a master of solving cases. I am impressed."

At that moment, Chu Yuanzhen recalled Xu Qi'an's younger cousin, the third of the family. He had previously speculated that Xu's cousin might be connected to the soaring clear qi of the Lesser Saint Hall and believed Daoist Jinlian had given him a fragment of the Earth Book because of this uniqueness.

Having now witnessed Xu Qi'an's own remarkable abilities, Chu Yuanzhen grew even more convinced of this theory.

\*Daoist Jinlian is indeed a man of great foresight.\*

Suddenly, Chu Yuanzhen felt a strange sensation, realising a message had come from one of the Heavenly Book fragment holders. He promptly excused himself, saying, "I need to use the restroom."

Simultaneously, Xu Qi'an stood up as well, saying, "I also need to use the restroom."

They paused, staring at each other for a moment before Xu Qi'an, without a change in expression, gestured for Chu Yuanzhen to go first.

Chu Yuanzhen nodded and left the quiet room. He estimated that the communication among the members of the Heaven and Earth Society would take some time, and it would be awkward if Xu Qi'an returned and caught him in the act.

Once Chu Yuanzhen's footsteps faded away, Xu Qi'an took out his small jade mirror to check the message.

【FIVE: I've been scammed out of my silver. What should I do?】

\*This... is both completely expected and entirely within reason...\* Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched. Given that he was supposed to be dead, he refrained from responding right away.

After a few seconds, Chu Yuanzhen replied:

【FOUR: What happened? How did your silver get scammed?】

【SIX: Five, where are you now? How far are you from the capital? How much silver did you lose? If you don't have anywhere to eat, see if there's a temple nearby and beg for alms.】

Xu Qi'an almost burst out laughing, covering his mouth. Only monks beg for alms, but if Five goes to a temple to beg, how would the monks feel?

【TWO: Losing silver is one thing, but make sure you don't lose yourself... Seriously, how could your tribe send a young girl all the way to the Great Feng without an elder to accompany you?】

【ONE: Just remember not to do anything that violates the Great Feng's laws.】

【NINE: Oh, Five, if you're still near the Southern Marches, you should just go back. The road is dangerous, and the world is full of treachery.】

\*Everyone seems genuinely worried about Five...\* Xu Qi'an's fingers hovered over the mirror, itching to join the conversation but resisting the urge to speak.

...

Chapter 269. The Last Day of the Exams

Lina was deeply moved by the concern of the Heaven and Earth Society, and began recounting her story of being deceived:

【FIVE: Thank you all for your concern. I'm currently in Yongzhou. This morning, I met an old Daoist priest who told me that I had extraordinary bones and was a one-in-a-million prodigy. I thought he must be a true master, otherwise, how could he see my uniqueness among the masses...】

\*Wait, that's just the typical con artist line! Are you really that gullible, or just overconfident?\* Xu Qi'an restrained himself from sending a message to ridicule her.

【TWO: And then you just let him scam you without any precautions?】

Li Miaozen asked, clearly exasperated.

She was furious at hearing about such injustice, yet feeling helpless that she couldn't rush over to help. This feeling of powerlessness was infuriating, making her want to stomp her feet in frustration.

Lina hurriedly defended herself: 【FIVE: Of course I'm not that foolish.】

\*If you're not foolish, then who is?\*

The members of the Heaven and Earth Society silently scoffed.

【FIVE: This Daoist was indeed capable. Not only did he recognize that I was a prodigy, but he also figured out that I'm from the Southern Marches. When I left, I changed into the Great Feng's attire, completely disguising myself as a local woman.】

【FOUR: What about your accent? Did you manage to change that?】

【FIVE: What accent?】

..... The group chat fell into brief silence before Master Hengyuan replied: 【SIX: No problem, Five, go on.】

【FIVE: The old Daoist said that when traveling, the most important thing is having enough money. He asked where I was heading, and I told him I was going to the capital. He then asked how much silver I had, and I told him sixty taels.

【He said, 'The journey to the capital is long, and sixty taels won't be enough.'】

By now, everyone knew where this was going.

【FIVE: The old Daoist said he had a Treasure Bowl that could multiply money. Put in one coin, and by the next day, the bowl would be filled with copper coins. Put in one tael, and by the next day, the bowl would be full of silver.】

【FOUR: And you believed him?】

【FIVE: At first, I didn't. But the old Daoist demonstrated it for me. He asked me to put in a piece of broken silver, covered the bowl with a cloth, and after an hour, there were indeed several more pieces of silver.

【The Daoist said his treasure was only for those destined, and sold it to me for a mere sixty taels...

【I put my last two copper coins in the bowl, and it's been over two hours now, but no silver has appeared.】

\*Her level of gullibility is simply touching...\*

Xu Qi'an chuckled. It seemed that tricking the little barbarian girl out of her money had to be done through deceit—stealing or robbing wouldn't work; only scamming was effective.

【TWO: Five, treasures are priceless and hard to come by. How could someone just give one away for free? Remember this lesson.】

【FIVE: But Daoist Jinlian gave me the Earth Book Fragment for free, saying treasures are for those destined.】

【TWO: Blame it on Daoist Jinlian.】

Daoist Jinlian: "....."

“Hahaha!” Xu Qi'an snorted like a pig.

“The purpose of Heaven and Earth Society is to support one another, not to mock each other.”

Suddenly, a soft and charming voice, filled with the allure of a mature woman, sounded from behind him.

The pig sounds were abruptly cut short. Feeling slightly embarrassed, he turned to see Luo Yuheng, who had appeared unnoticed, and quickly stood up, “National Teacher.”

Luo Yuheng was dressed in a magnificent feathered robe, embroidered with a yin-yang on her back. Her silky black hair was tied up with a black jade hairpin, and her fair complexion resembled porcelain, with delicate features that were breathtakingly beautiful.

The red cinnabar dot on her forehead added to her ethereal charm.

Her gaze fell on the Earth Book Fragment, and with a slight smile in her eyes, she said calmly, “So, Five is from the Southern Marches?”

\*How do you know that? How long have you been listening...\* Xu Qi'an honestly replied, “It seems she’s from the Strength Gu Tribe.”

Luo Yuheng nodded slowly and commented, “Their strength is unmatched.”

Xu Qi'an snuck a glance at the National Teacher’s delicate lips, “Stronger than a martial artist?”

With an air of cold elegance, Luo Yuheng resembled a jade statue of a beautiful woman. She returned to her seat on the prayer mat and said, “In terms of pure strength, martial artists fall far short of the experts from the Strength Gu Tribe.

“The seven shaman clans each have very specialized abilities. Individually, any one of them is not much of a threat, but when united, even the Buddhists would have to show caution.”

\*It sounds similar to my one blade from heaven and earth, an extreme approach rather than a well-rounded development...\* Xu Qi'an nodded thoughtfully.

The beautiful National Teacher was in a chatty mood today, continuing, “Earlier, I overheard Chu Yuanxian and you discussing the ancient gods and demons. Indeed, the Gu God is the last surviving deity of that era.”

“There really were gods and demons?” Xu Qi'an was taken aback.

“Except for the yao-monsters and humans, all other surviving strange beasts in Jiuzhou are descendants of gods and demons. Haven’t you been to Yunzhou? That legendary beast in Baidi City is a descendant of those deities. The spirit dragon in the imperial palace, the wyrms of the Southern Marches... all of them trace their lineage back to those beings.”

\*So these gods and demons are like ancient dinosaurs...\* Xu Qi'an probed further, "How did they go extinct?"

\*It can't have been a volcanic eruption or a meteor strike, right?\*

Luo Yuheng didn't respond, closing her beautiful eyes and remaining silent.

Xu Qi'an took this opportunity to secretly admire her beauty. Though the National Teacher could show many different appearances, depending on the observer's inner desires—'a white-haired little sister', 'a childhood sweetheart', or 'a mature 36D big sister'—what he saw most often was her true self: a kind-hearted auntie.

A woman in her thirties or forties, with a delicate and graceful face that lacked the vivacity of a young maiden and the sultriness of a voluptuous woman. Instead, she exuded an icy calm and the dignity of an elder.

Xu Qi'an admired her openly, knowing that Luo Yuheng was well aware of her charm. No man could resist it, and there was no point in being secretive. Besides, his furtive glances would never escape her perception, so he figured he might as well be upfront.

At that moment, he noticed that Daoist Jinlian had sent a message: **【NINE: I've temporarily blocked Five from receiving messages. Let's discuss how we should handle this situation.】**

\*..... Did I miss something while I was admiring the National Teacher?\* Xu Qi'an reluctantly shifted his attention back to the group chat.

**【NINE: I suggest we don't intervene and let her learn from the hardships of the world. From the Southern Marches to the capital, she will undoubtedly gain valuable experience and grow from it.】**

Li Miaozen disagreed with Daoist Jinlian's approach and argued: **【TWO: Daoist, the world is full of dangers. Though Five is powerful, she's too naive. Intelligence is always more valuable than raw strength.】**

The zhuangyuan added his thoughts: **【FOUR: Although Five is indeed naive and inexperienced, she's not foolish. She knows how to avoid danger and understands what's worth protecting. I think Daoist Jinlian's suggestion has merit.】**

\*Daoist Jinlian's tough love is wise—letting her face the harsh realities of the world will force her to grow quickly...\* Xu Qi'an silently agreed, thinking the plan was quite sound.

**【SIX: I believe our immediate concern shouldn't be her long-term growth, but rather how she'll find food and shelter for the night.】**

..... That remark seemed to conclude the discussion, and for a while, the group chat remained silent.

The small meeting within the Heaven and Earth Society could be summarized as:



FIVE: "I'm stuck in a foreign land with no money, where do I eat and sleep? Urgently seeking advice, online now!"

What could anyone do? After all, they were just online friends, scattered across different regions of the world. It wasn't like WeChat or Alipay existed for them to send money.

Not even immortals could help here.

【TWO: Why not have Five perform on the streets? The 'smashing rocks on the chest' act is quite popular with common folk. You can smash your way to the capital and earn your travel expenses.】

【SIX: She could seek alms from temples and ask for lodging. But since temples are scarce in the Great Feng, it won't help in the immediate future.】

【FOUR: In times of need, one could resort to some light pilfering.】

Chu Yuanzhen's suggestion was to target some rich folk and steal a bit of silver.

【NINE: Five doesn't know how to steal. If you force her into it, it'll just turn into a mugging.】

After all, she was from the Strength Gu tribe.

Just as everyone was about to offer more suggestions, they found themselves blocked and unable to send or receive messages.

At the same time, Xu Qi'an received a message from Daoist Jinlian:

【Three, do you have any suggestions?】

Though he talked about letting Five suffer some of society's beatings, Daoist Jinlian seemed genuinely concerned about the holders of the Book of the Earth fragments. Xu Qi'an thought for a moment and then replied:

【"Is Five pretty?"】

【NINE: Her looks are decent.】

\*Well, that's easy then...\* Xu Qi'an wrote back, explaining his plan: 【She should become a king of the sea.】

【What does that mean?】 Daoist Jinlian was confused.

Question: \*How do good-looking men and women travel across countries without a penny to their name?\*

Answer: \*By stringing along admirers.\*

Xu Qi'an relayed his idea to Daoist Jinlian and added, 【Teach Five this phrase: 'Rabbits are so cute, why eat them?'

【Young chivalrous men on the road will fall for it. Master this skill, and she'll never worry about food or lodging again.】

Daoist Jinlian chose to ignore him after that.

When communication resumed, Daoist Jinlian shared everyone's thoughts with Five, urging her to protect herself and have a safe journey.

As for Xu Qi'an's suggestion, Daoist Jinlian decided to brush it off. While it might have been a bit shameless, it was actually practical. However, it was clear that Five wasn't capable of pulling off such an advanced maneuver.

That was Three's own specialty.

Not long after, Chu Yuanzhen returned, bowed to the meditating Luo Yuheng, and then said, "Brother Xu, it's your turn."

Xu Qi'an calmly walked out, circled the outhouse once, and then returned. As he entered, he saw a young Daoist leading a middle-aged general in armor, striding swiftly in their direction.

The general's expression was one of anxiety, as if something urgent had occurred.

The young Daoist stopped outside the quiet chamber and called out, "Sect Leader, the Captain of King Huai's Guards requests an audience."

\*King Huai... that's the title of the Zhenbei King, right?\* Xu Qi'an paused upon hearing this and discreetly observed the armoured general.

This man had abundant vitality, restrained divine energy, and considerable cultivation. However, his brow was furrowed in worry, clearly troubled.

The Zhenbei King was a "prince" — brother to the Emperor — and Huai was his official feudal title. "Zhenbei King", "Protector of the North" was merely an honorific earned through military achievements.

"What is it?" came Luo Yuheng's soft, enchanting voice from within the chamber.

"Master, the Princess Consort has gone missing. I've searched the entire royal city, but there's no sign of her. Since she was on good terms with you, I came to inquire if you might know where she went," the general said in a low voice.

\*The Zhenbei King's consort... the famed beauty of the Great Feng?\* Xu Qi'an perked up.

He had seen many beautiful women, including powerful ones like the Empress and peerless ones like the National Teacher. Now, his curiosity was piqued to see what the so-called greatest beauty in the Great Feng looked like.

"What business do I have with the Princess Consort? She is not here at Lingbao Temple. You'd better search elsewhere," Luo Yuheng answered.

The general, still filled with concern, took his leave.

\*The Princess Consort is missing?\* Xu Qi'an watched the guard captain's departing figure with great interest.

...

After lunch at Lingbao Temple, Xu Qi'an returned to his post at the constabulary, and lead his patrol on the streets. One silver and two bronze coins patrolled the streets with high spirits, dedicated to their duty.

Those two groups of wandering swordsmen had already paid a hefty fine of silver to "ransom" back themselves. Now, Xu Qi'an carried six hundred taels of silver notes close to his chest, feeling immensely satisfied. Every time he spotted someone with the attire of a wandering warrior, it was as if he were eyeing a fat sheep.

Unfortunately, he didn't encounter a single brawl that afternoon.

After his shift ended, Xu returned home for dinner. While eating, Uncle Xu mentioned some amusing news from the day: "Today, the Zhenbei King's consort ran away from home. The Five Guards of the capital were all deployed, and even the white-cloaks from the Sitianjian helped in the search. They spent the whole afternoon looking but couldn't find her."

Auntie, biting her chopsticks, asked, "And what happened after that?"

"She returned home by herself, so yeah, she just ran away from home. The guards at the palace were panicking, thinking someone had kidnapped her." Second Uncle shook his head, exasperated. "Women, I tell you, they're just so wilful! They had thousands of people searching the whole city."

Auntie rolled her eyes and sneered, "Thousands of soldiers, and you couldn't find one woman. The court should just replace you all with dogs."

Xu Qi'an raised his thumb and praised, "Auntie's verbal strikes are truly sharp!"

Auntie, with her sharp features, didn't quite understand her nephew's odd phrasing and gave him a sideways glance.

Xu Erlang furrowed his brow and pointed out the oddity: "Although King Huai is a royal, his consort is still just that. It's unusual for this to mobilize all five of the capital's guards."

After all, such a large-scale search was a privilege reserved for the imperial household.

Second Uncle nodded, "That puzzled us as well. When we asked a \*Qianhu\*, even he didn't know. He just said it was a direct order from His Majesty."

\*Emperor Yuanjing must really care about this sister-in-law of his... Could it be an old flame?\* Xu Qi'an wondered briefly before dismissing the thought. After all, the princess consort had once been one of Yuanjing's concubines, but she entered the palace rather late, long after the emperor had embraced celibacy.

Later, she was bestowed upon the Zhenbei King as his consort.

\*There might be some hidden stories behind this...\* But Xu Qi'an didn't care to dwell on it. Instead, he turned to Erlang and asked, "Is tomorrow the last day of exams?"

Xu Erlang nodded.

"Do well. When it comes to poetry, your big brother can proudly say, 'Five millennia long across all Jiuzhou, none can match my hand!'" Xu Qi'an said with confidence.

...

The next morning, before dawn broke, Xu Erlang, accompanied by his father and older brother, arrived at the examination hall, lantern in hand.

Once again, he spotted the bald monk and the swordsman in blue robes. This time, however, he remained calm, having grown used to their presence. He even returned their gaze with a cool smile.

"Number Three is quite arrogant with that smile," Chu Yuanzhen remarked.

"It's the final round of the metropolitan examination. He's probably confident that it's in the bag," Hengyuan explained.

"For a moment, I thought it was a provocation."

Hengyuan chuckled, "Let's go. The next step is to wait for the results to be posted. Then we can focus on your duel with Li Miaozen."

Chu Yuanzhen nodded and walked alongside Hengyuan. Glancing at the monk, he asked, "Master, what's your current combat strength?"

Hengyuan thought for a moment, then shook his head, "I rarely engage in combat."

Chu Yuanzhen simply responded, "I see." Both he and Number Six were hard to gauge by normal rank. By the standards of a martial artist, Chu Yuanzhen was just a Seventh Rank Refining Spirit, yet his true strength far exceeded that.

Hengyuan, on the other hand, was an Eighth Rank Warrior Monk, but his actual power was deep and mysterious.

...

Elsewhere, after the security frisk, Xu Erlang entered the small, sealed room and awaited the final round of the metropolitan examination.

Poetry!

Chapter 270. End of the Spring Exams

The examination hall for the Spring Imperial Examinations consisted of rows of small dark cells known as *\*haoshe\**, "numbered rooms". Once a candidate entered, the supervising *\*haobing\** "number guards" would lock the door, leaving only a small window for delivering the exam papers.

For the entire day, candidates had to eat, drink, and attend to nature's calls inside the small, dimly lit rooms.

Under the faint glow of the flickering candle, the tiny room was bathed in a warm, yellowish light. Xu Erlang sat at his desk, slowly adding water to the inkstone, preparing to grind ink.

There was still plenty of time before the examination began, and this interval was enough for him to calm his mind and think.

Historically, the Imperial Examinations emphasized the Confucian classics while paying less attention to poetry and prose. Moreover, the poetry scene of the Great Feng had long been in decline. Thus, for most candidates, the final round of the examinations was merely a formality.

When entering the examination hall earlier, the scholars Xu Erlang was acquainted with had been laughing and chatting, relaxed and carefree. Unlike the first two rounds, where they had worn serious expressions, tense and focused as if marching into battle.

Others could afford to relax, but Xu Erlang knew he couldn't afford to be careless.

He was a student of Cloud Deer Academy, and given the court's attitude toward the academy's scholars, even if he passed and became a \*jinshi\*, he would either be sent to a remote, impoverished area or left to languish without an official post.

Xu Erlang had his ambitions. He neither wanted to be exiled to a desolate region nor left in the capital to be shelved.

\*The road ahead is long...\* Xu Xinnian sighed.

Just then, the haobing knocked on the small window and called out in a muffled voice, "Master, your exam paper has arrived."

The candidates for the Spring Imperial Examinations were all \*juren\*, scholars with the qualifications to become officials, so the guards addressed them as "Master."

Xu Xinnian received the paper and spread it out on the desk. By this time, the sky was starting to brighten, although the sun had not yet risen.

Under the warm glow of the candlelight, Xu Xinnian read the question: a line from \*Chengzi · Warfare\*: "The three armies can be deprived of their commander, but the will of a common man cannot be taken away."

A well-read scholar like Xu Erlang instantly grasped the theme: Ode to Aspiration!

He stared at the paper, momentarily dumbfounded, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"Did my brother step in dog shit before entering my room that day?" Xu Erlang muttered to himself.

How could he have guessed this correctly?

Xu Erlang had brushed off the matter of drawing lots that day as merely humouring his annoying older brother. Though it was possible to predict questions for the classics and policy essays based on clues and trends, poetry topics were entirely at the whim of the examiners. They could choose anything, even something as random as a roadside flower.

And yet, he had guessed it?

Unless his brother had stepped in dog shit the night before, Xu Erlang couldn't think of any other explanation.

\*Wait a minute...\* Xu Xinnian's shock, confusion, and bewilderment all transformed into elation and excitement.

\*Big brother had guessed the question right. He guessed it right!\*

He straightened his back, barely restraining the urge to let out three long cries of joy to express his overwhelming excitement.

\*With my brother's poetic talent, since he guessed the question, I, Xu Erlang, shall dominate this third round of the exams. Perhaps... I could even vie for huiyuan!\*

In the metropolitan examination, those who passed were called \*gongshi\*, and the top candidate among them was called \*huiyuan\*.

His reasoning was sound. First, the metropolitan exams were marked anonymously, so his identity as a Cloud Deer Academy scholar wouldn't be revealed, sparing him from being sidelined. Second, Xu Xinnian was a natural scholar, the favoured student of the great Confucian Zhang Shen. Moreover, with the support of the Confucian path's eidetic memory and clear thinking, his abilities far surpassed those of the scholars from the Imperial Academy.

Lastly, to prevent cheating, the Great Feng had appointed three chief examiners and several assistants, each representing different factions—perhaps even hostile to one another.

Even if someone managed to bribe one examiner, they certainly wouldn't be able to bribe the other two.

Thus, every metropolitan examination became a battle of wits among the examiners themselves, leading to eventual compromise and the final decisions.

"If heaven birthed not I, Xu Xinnian; the metropolitan exams would be a night that never ends!"

Even someone as proud as Xu Xinnian couldn't contain his emotions in this empty room. He waved his arms and laughed like a fool.

If there were a bed, he would be rolling on it. If not, he might just writhe around like a worm in his excitement.

"My brother is truly my lucky star! Calm down, calm down. What was the poem Big Brother gave me to express aspiration again...?"

Xu Xinnian took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down.

Luckily, as an eighth-ranked Confucian, he had long mastered the ability to recall anything at will. The poem his brother had given him was excellent, and he remembered it well.

He dipped his brush into the ink, spreading out the manuscript paper. It was then that he realized his hands were still trembling slightly.

\*No composure. It's just the metropolitan exams, why am I so excited? Father always said I had the potential of a prime minister.\*

With a wry smile at his own reaction, Xu Xinnian relaxed a little. His hands stopped shaking, and he swiftly began writing on the paper:

\*Clear wine in golden goblets, ten thousand cash a cup,\*

\*Delicacies on jade platters, a myriad silver more.\*

\*Yet I spurn my drink and toss my chopsticks, food left untouched,\*

\*Drawing my sword, with empty heart and unclear thoughts.\*

\*I want to cross the Yellow River, yet it's bound with ice,\*  
\*I want to climb the Taihang Mountains, yet the snow lies deep.\*  
\*So idly I fish by a shallow limpid stream,\*  
\*Dreaming of sailing towards the sun's far reach.\*  
\*Oh, travelling is hard! Travelling is hard!\*

\*So many crossroads; which to choose?\*

\*When the winds are high and the waves are tall,\*

\*I'll hoist my sails over the ocean blue.[^1][^2]\*

After finishing the poem, Xu Xinnian read it over several times to make sure there were no mistakes. However, a new doubt crept into his mind.

\*What is the Yellow River? And what is Taihang? So idly I fish by a shallow limpid stream, dreaming of sailing towards the sun's far reach... is there some kind of folk tale associated with these lines?\*

As a well-read scholar, Xu Xinnian racked his brain but couldn't figure out where these places were. Based on his understanding of poetry, "So idly I fish by a shallow limpid stream" and "Dreaming of sailing towards the sun's far reach" seemed to be allusions.

\*Big brother, really... writing a poem without annotations. How am I supposed to understand his mindset or his profound meanings?\*

\*Yellow River and Taihang must be the names of a river and a mountain. These can be replaced. As for the other two lines, even if they're not allusions, they're easy enough to grasp in meaning. It shouldn't be a problem.\*

With that, Xu Xinnian replaced "Yellow River" and "Taihang" before picking up his brush to title his poem:

\*Ode to the Difficult Road\*

...

The chief examiners for this Spring Imperial Examination were Zhao Tingfang, Grand Academician of the Eastern Pavilion; Liu Hong, the Right Censor-in-Chief; and Qian Qingshu, Grand Academician of the Wuying Hall.

Unlike the scholars, the chief examiners and their assistants had not stepped out of the Examination Compound since the start of the imperial exams. The gates were locked tight, and unless they sprouted wings, leaving was out of the question.

To prevent collusion and cheating between examiners and candidates, the examiners were not allowed to leave the compound until the list of successful candidates was finalised.

Compared to the frantic atmosphere of grading during the first two rounds, the mood among the assistant examiners had shifted dramatically.

“This is absolute nonsense. What rubbish poetry dares to show its face at the imperial exams?”

“Using bamboo as a metaphor to express one's willpower is a decent angle, but the poem focuses more on the bamboo than the actual theme. It's putting the cart before the horse.”

“Sigh, I've been reading for hours, and there's not a single poem that stands out.”

“Isn't it always like this? We've all gotten used to it by now.”

The examiners, also known as “curtain officers”, were grading while commenting aloud. Although the atmosphere seemed tense at first glance, in reality, this was the most relaxed part of their work.

Poetry wasn't taken seriously—if it turned out well, it was a pleasant bonus; if not, it didn't really matter. The students' poems were mostly average at best, and an ordinary composition was considered a rare gem. None of it was enough for the examiners to treat seriously.

In the capital, there was one person whose name was inextricably linked with poetry—Nightwatcher Xu Qi'an, hailed by the literati as the champion of poetry or, as some would say, the savior of the Great Feng poetry scene.

“If Xu Qi'an were participating in this exam, there would be no doubt. At the very least, this year would see a masterpiece that could stand the test of time.”

“Who wouldn't agree? But alas, Xu Qi'an isn't a scholar. When future generations read about the famous poems of the Yuanjing era, and find that they all come from a martial man, where will we scholars hide our faces?”

The literati held mixed feelings about Xu Qi'an. On the one hand, they were grateful for his rise, which had given the past two centuries at least a few respectable poems, saving future generations from shame.

On the other hand, they lamented that he was a warrior, not a scholar, for this too would lead to future disgrace.

In the two hundred years of the Great Feng, with millions of scholars, none could compare to a mere warrior.

“All of this is Xu Pingzhi's fault.”

At that moment, an examiner unfurled a newly transcribed paper, glanced at it for a few seconds, and suddenly froze in place. His body turned rigid, and he stood still as if turned to stone.

But his lips kept moving, repeating the same words over and over.

After a few minutes, the examiner abruptly stood up, looked around at his colleagues, took a deep breath, and declared, “Who says that the scholars of Great Feng can't produce good poetry? Who says it?”

The other examiners turned to him in confusion, unsure of what had gotten into him.



It was a well-established fact that the poets of this era were mediocre at best, and no one was disputing it.

Bang!

The examiner slapped the paper onto the table, his chest heaving with excitement. "I swear, this poem will be remembered throughout the ages. This year's exam will certainly be noted by the historians."

Another curious examiner stepped over and picked up the paper. After just a glance, he too began to tremble in excitement.

"What a masterpiece! What a poem! Ha ha ha, who says the scholars of the Great Feng can't produce good poetry?"

Now the other examiners realized that a true gem had appeared. They crowded around, passing the paper among themselves, offering animated critiques and praise.

"Such a poem deserves a grand toast."

"'When the winds are high and the waves are tall, I'll hoist my sails over the ocean blue.' This is the kind of poetry a true scholar should write."

"How could a mere student compose such a world-weary and profound piece?"

"Perhaps this was written by someone who has failed many times and wishes to express their resolve through poetry."

The appearance of this poem, \*Ode to the Difficult Road\*, was like a golden phoenix among a flock of hens. Its value was unmatched, and the examiners couldn't stop passing it around and excitedly discussing it.

"Ahem!"

A cough came from the doorway, where the white-haired Grand Academician of the Eastern Pavilion stood with his hands behind his back. The noise had drawn him over.

At once, the examiners fell silent.

"What sort of behaviour is this, making such a racket?"

Grand Academician Zhao Tingfang reprimanded them before asking, "I heard someone say that this poem will be remembered for generations?"

An examiner immediately stepped forward, respectfully handing over the paper.

Zhao Tingfang gave them all a sharp look before taking the paper and squinting at it... His hand trembled as he held the poem.

Anyone could tell that this was an exceptional work, one that stirred the soul.

But experience changed how a person was moved.

This poem was not only about ambition—it was about a life marked by hardship and struggle. From the lines of bewilderment at the difficulty of the road to the triumphant cry of riding the wind and waves, anyone who had faced similar challenges would be moved.

The final line encapsulated not just ambition but elevated the entire poem's sentiment to a profound level.

\*This child is a great talent. If their answers in the Classics and Policy questions are also excellent, I shall certainly name them the huiyuan!\* Zhao Tingfang thought to himself.

...

The day after the Spring Imperial Examination ended, Xu Xinnian noticed that his family's treatment of him had taken a sharp downturn. Every morning before, his mother would have the kitchen prepare a steaming bowl of fresh milk for him.

At lunch, he'd have rich, aromatic chicken soup, and in the evening, it would be ginseng broth.

His mother would check in on him throughout the day, offering comfort. His father and elder brother would also ask how he was doing during meals. His younger sister, Xu Lingyue, would do the same, and even his youngest sister, Xu Lingyin, would occasionally cheer him on, saying, "Second brother, work hard!"

But since the final round of exams, the milk had vanished, the chicken soup was gone, and so was the ginseng broth. After they asked when the results would be posted, everyone stopped paying much attention to him.

At the dinner table, Xu Qi'an asked, "Why does Erlang look so upset? Did the last round not go well?"

Xu Xinnian said nothing. After the meal, he dragged his brother into the study and stared at him intensely. "Big brother... you guessed the question."

Xu Qi'an was both surprised and not surprised by this outcome. He nodded and asked, "Was it patriotism or aspiration?"

"Aspiration!"

Xu Xinnian asked for clarification, "Where are the Yellow River and Taihang? And what about 'So idly I fish by a shallow limpid stream' and 'Dreaming of sailing towards the sun's far reach' — what allusions do these lines have?"

\*...Huh? Those lines have historical allusions? I don't remember that!\* Xu Qi'an was utterly bewildered.

"'So idly I fish by a shallow limpid stream' is because I enjoy fishing. And 'Dreaming of sailing towards the sun's far reach' is... it's... Hey, why are you asking so many questions? The exam is over, stop worrying about it!"

"Hurry up and tear up those Four Books and Five Classics. Tomorrow, I'll take you to Jiaofangsi for some fun."

Xu Qi'an grumbled and escaped.

Back in his room, he found Zhong Li sitting on the bed, bandaging her head, with faint traces of blood seeping through.

“Did you fall again?”

“Mm-hmm.”

Zhong Li nodded pitifully, then added, “I’ve discovered that your sister’s fortune is incredibly resilient.”

“Which sister?” Xu Qi'an asked.