

Nightwatcher 271

Chapter 271. Princess Lin'an's Life-Threatening Situation

"The little one!"

After bandaging her head, Zhong Li took off her two embroidered shoes, hugged her knees, and lowered her head as she spoke, "I've stayed in your esteemed household for quite some time. From your uncle to the servants, everyone's luck has worsened.

"Only that child remains unaffected, showing no change in fortune."

So it's not Lingyue, huh? Makes sense. Heaven has already blessed her with Auntie's beauty. If she were favoured any more, Little Pea would be too pitiful... Xu Qi'an thought.

"Does this mean my little sister has great fortune as well?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Zhong Li slowly shook her head. "Those with fortune are blessed and benefit wherever they go. She clearly isn't one of them. Her fortune is simply that resilient that she can't be affected by bad luck."

"The whole household's luck has worsened... hearing you say this, I wonder if the reason I haven't found any silver on the street these past few days is because of you?"

Ever since taking in Zhong Li, this inauspicious star, Xu Qi'an had stopped stumbling upon silver cash.

"I don't know," Zhong Li answered honestly.

I suddenly have an idea. If Lingyin is immune to your bad luck, I can bring her along when I go out, and I might start finding silver again, Xu Qi'an pondered and suggested, "How about we test it?"

"How will we test it?" Zhong Li asked.

"Just wait here."

Xu Qi'an left the room, went to the front hall, and carried out a flowerpot of orchids, Auntie's cherished possession. He placed it on the roof ridge of the corridor. Then he walked toward the eastern wing, listening for a moment before knocking on the door and calling out, "Second Uncle, is Lingyin asleep?"

Second Uncle's puzzled voice came from within. "She's still tossing about in bed. What's going on?"

"Nothing, just bring Lingyin out," Xu Qi'an replied.

Without further question, Second Uncle carried Little Pea out. Xu Qi'an, being mindful since this was his second uncle and aunt's bedroom and it was already late, stepped back a few paces.

"Big Bwother..." Little Pea spread her tiny arms and instinctively leapt into Xu Qi'an's embrace.

Holding her, Xu Qi'an headed toward his room. Reaching the corridor where the flowerpot was perched overhead, he set Lingyin down and said, "Sit here and eat some snacks. Once you're done, we'll head back."

Ordinarily, Little Pea would have wondered why she had to sit outside to eat. But the moment she heard there were snacks involved, her already limited intelligence took a nosedive.

"Okay!" she responded cheerfully.

Thus, Xu Qi'an placed the tiny Little Pea on the step beside the corridor, and as if by magic, producing a little cake from somewhere and handing it to her to eat.

"With my bad luck, the flowerpot is bound to fall," Zhong Li whispered.

"Mm-hmm," Xu Qi'an nodded.

He was testing Lingyin's fortune. If Zhong Li was wrong, no harm done—he would simply intercept the pot before it could hurt Little Pea.

A few seconds later, a soft "thud" sounded from the roof ridge, and sure enough, the flowerpot tumbled down.

At that exact moment, a ginger cat darted out from the flowerbed, leaping up and batting the flowerpot aside, sending it toward Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an dodged to the side, but Zhong Li wasn't so lucky...

The pot shattered on Zhong Li's head.

"I knew this would happen. I'll go back to my room to bandage up," Zhong Li muttered as she quietly walked away.

"Kitty! Kitty..." Little Pea, with her mouth full of snacks, pointed excitedly at the ginger cat.

"Alright, alright. Big Brother will take you back to bed," Xu Qi'an said, scooping her up and carrying her back to the east wing, handing her over to Second Uncle. He then reminded him to make sure she brushed her teeth.

Remembering that the shattered pot had been Auntie's beloved orchid, Xu Qi'an collected the shards, the flower, and the soil and carefully returned them to the hall.

After finishing everything, he went to the backyard, scanning around until he saw the ginger cat sitting on the well's edge, its amber eyes glowing as it stared at him.

"Daoist." Xu Qi'an greeted as he approached.

"What were you doing just now?" The ginger cat spoke in a human voice.

"Just a small experiment," Xu Qi'an replied.

The ginger cat slowly nodded. "Was that the Sitianjian's Master of Prophecy earlier?"

"Mm-hmm," Xu Qi'an confirmed, then added, "With your discerning eyes, you must have seen the dark clouds gathering over her head."

"It's more than just dark clouds. She seems like someone cursed by the heavens..." The ginger cat lifted a paw, stroking its whiskers. "Unlike a Master of Prophecy, a Master of Divination from the warlock clans seems favoured by the heavens. They only need to endure eighty-one tribulations, and if they survive, they can become a true Master of Divination."

Hearing this, Xu Qi'an chimed in, "Whereas a Master of Prophecy must endure 3,600 calamities... hmm?"

Xu Qi'an suddenly paused, confused. "Master of Prophecy... Master of Divination... aren't they essentially the same thing? Just with different names."

As he spoke, he looked to Daoist Jinlian for confirmation.

It was precisely because the terms were different that he hadn't connected "Master of Prophecy" and "Master of Divination" before. But after hearing Daoist Jinlian's words, it dawned on him that the two were probably referring to the same thing, just under different names.

Much like how "goddess" and "player" refer to different roles but share the same purpose: maintaining relationships with multiple suitors or lovers.

The ginger cat lowered its paw and sat neatly on the well's edge, looking rather cute, though its voice remained that of an old man. "Heh, it seems you still don't know.

"The Arcanist system has six hundred years of history, rising alongside the Great Feng. But isn't it strange, that whilst the martial system has been perfected over millennia, there still isn't a martial god? As for the Warlocks, Buddhists, Daoists, and Confucianists, they all have history stretching back thousands of years,

"In a mere six hundred years, apart from a beyond-rank, the Arcanist class has produced everything from nine to one, a perfect set."

Right, after only six hundred years the Arcanist system has become pretty much complete. If it really were a system created from nothing, then what kind of prodigy was the first generation Jianzheng, and why wouldn't such a person attain beyond-rank status?... Xu Qi'an astutely noticed a problem with the history, and asked, confused: "So, why's this?"

The ginger cat didn't respond directly, rather laughing: "Let me tell you a bit of history, and you can reflect on it yourself."

After licking its paw again, the cat continued, "The founding emperor of the Great Feng faced many hardships, and was nearly pushed to the brink several times. One year, he went to the northeast to seek help from the Church of the Warlock God, promising them that if he succeeded in overthrowing the corrupt dynasty and founding a new one, he would make their religion the state religion.

"That would mean bringing the Central Plains into the warlocks' domain. The Church of the Warlock God agreed, lending him 200,000 elite soldiers, along with many of their masters.

"In the end, that founding emperor toppled the decaying old dynasty, defeated the various warlords, and unified the Central Plains. But the Church of the Warlock God did not achieve their goal of becoming the state religion.

"Because the Great Feng gained a Sitianjian, and thus the Arcanist system was born."

Xu Qi'an was left with only two words in his mind: Oh Fuck!

*Daoist Jinlian was ostensibly recounting the dark history of the founding emperor of Great Feng burning bridges after crossing them... although, it's hard to consider it "dark history," as founding

emperors throughout history have always been ruthlessly pragmatic and morally dubious figures. True gentlemen could never achieve such feats... However, Daoist Jinlian was actually hinting at the true origins of the Arcanist system.*

The Arcanist system originated from the warlocks!

This was the conclusion Xu Qi'an deduced based on his nine years of compulsory education in reading comprehension.

No wonder the abilities of a Master of Prophecy and a Master of Divination are so similar.

In fact, there's a parallel case with the Martial Artist system and the Warrior Monk system! If Arcanists truly evolved from warlocks, it's not an impossible notion... Xu Qi'an suddenly realized.

Moreover, he began to connect the dots, suspecting that the first Jianzheng might have been among the warlocks who assisted Great Feng back then.

Though Arcanists evolved from warlocks and had a foundation based off them, establishing a brand-new system is no easy task. The deeper truths behind this are probably only known to the first Jianzheng and the founding emperor of Great Feng... I suspect this might be related to the secret the Jianzheng is guarding. It might also unveil the mystery behind the mysterious arcanists in Yunzhou.

Xu Qi'an voiced his suspicions, hoping that the well-informed Daoist Jinlian could provide some clarity.

Unfortunately, Daoist Jinlian, lacking any intention of imparting wisdom to Xu Qi'an, pretended not to hear him.

I guess I can only seek out Wei Yuan or the Eldest Princess to ask about this... Xu Qi'an shifted the topic, asking, "What brings you here, Daoist?"

The orange cat stared at him quietly for a moment before speaking. "Passing by, I noticed that your good fortune has disappeared, so I came to check on you."

What immediately appeared in Xu Qi'an's mind was: ???

A moment later: !!!

His second reaction came as he realized what had happened. No wonder he hadn't found any silver lately—it was all due to the Jianzheng's "404` Technique".

"But after seeing that girl, I understood the reason," said the orange cat.

Daoist Jinlian believes that Zhong Li's misfortune has cancelled out my good fortune? Xu Qi'an didn't bother explaining and remained silent.

He also had no interest in teaching an old Daoist about his fortune.

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After bidding farewell to Daoist Jinlian, Xu Qi'an returned to his room with a sour expression, glaring at Zhong Li without saying a word.

This woman, her head wrapped in bandages and her face covered, looked pitiful. Noticing the change in Xu Qi'an's demeanor, she asked in a soft voice, "What did that Daoist master tell you?"

“None of your business.”

“Oh.” She lowered her head slightly.

But Xu Qi'an didn't let it go, snapping, “Did you know I used to find silver cash every day?”

“I didn't know, but I can understand.” Zhong Li replied honestly.

“Because of you, Jianzheng has kept me in the capital and blocked part of my fortune.” Xu Qi'an reasoned that it was only part of his fortune, as he could still ward off disasters for Zhong Li.

“I'm sorry...”

Is "sorry" enough? I'm losing hundreds of thousands every day... Xu Qi'an seethed. “You'll have to compensate me.”

“I... I don't have any silver.” Zhong Li shamefully lowered her head.

“If you don't have silver, then spend the night with me. My bed is sturdy and won't break.”

...

The next morning, Xu Qi'an woke up feeling refreshed and thoroughly satisfied. The bed had not collapsed.

Of course, this had nothing to do with Zhong Li. What he had said the night before was just angry talk. Though Jianzheng's actions pained him, he had never actually intended to subject Zhong Li to such an experience.

This woman had already suffered enough. Xu Qi'an's conscience wouldn't allow him to harm her further.

However, Zhong Li had agreed to give him two magical artifacts as compensation, which made Xu Qi'an happy, and he slept especially well.

After washing up, he went to the front hall for breakfast, where he heard Little Pea's wailing from a distance.

Stepping over the threshold, Xu Qi'an entered the room and saw Auntie pressing Xu Lingyin onto a stool, whipping her with a feather duster across her little bottom.

Xu Ershu, Xu Lingyue, and Xu Erlang continued eating unfazed, ignoring their sister's (or daughter's) cries, their focus solely on porridge, buns, and vegetables.

Seeing the injustice, Xu Qi'an loudly shouted, “Stop!”

Auntie didn't pay him any mind. This was her own daughter, so what business was it of his?

“Auntie, this is too much,” Xu Qi'an said, snatching the feather duster. “Lingyin is still young. You can't hit her like this.”

“Big bwother...”

That “big bwother” was shouted with such anguish and emotion, like the cry of a child to their father.

“Big Brother,” Xu Lingyue explained, “Mother’s beloved orchid was broken and can’t be saved. She suspects Lingyin broke it.”

Xu Qi'an handed the feather duster back to Auntie, patting her on the hand. “You have to discipline children early. If you don’t, it’ll be too late later. Auntie, you’re doing the right thing. Please, continue.”

“Waaah...” Xu Lingyin cried even harder, heartbroken.

As expected, this child has no good fortune—she’s purely relying on her tough fate.

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As more and more martial artists flooded into the capital, the city’s public order deteriorated rapidly. To address this issue, Wei Yuan devised a clever solution.

He ordered the construction of four sturdy white marble platforms, located in the northeast, southeast, southwest, and northwest corners of the outer city, naming them the "Heroic Platforms."

These platforms were specifically created for the “what’re you lookin’ at”, “you wanna go”, “chattin’ shit mate” wandering martial types to resolve their disputes. Before long, people arriving in the capital flocked to the Heroic Platforms. If they had an enemy in the capital, they would jump onto the platform and shout, "XXX, do you dare to come up and fight? If you don't, you're a yellow-bellied coward!"

If XXX heard this challenge, they would come to the platform the next day to fight.

This provided a venue for jianghu heroes to settle their feuds without involving ordinary citizens. It also gave the capital's residents constant entertainment and increased local dining revenues, as people gathered to watch.

Wei Yuan really knows his stuff; he’s an official who can get things done, Xu Qi'an nodded to himself, listening to Uncle Xu recount stories from his patrols.

In addition, young jianghu men without grudges would often take to the platform to spar and gain fame. Meanwhile, the female wanderers of the jianghu had little interest in showing off their skills on the stage. Instead, they preferred to chat and laugh with renowned male heroes, attend banquets, and find ways to curry favour with influential officials in the capital or flirt with promising young scholars.

This revealed the stark difference between what men and women sought. Men wanted instant fame, women wanted instant popularity.

Because of the many flirtatious cougars outside, Uncle Xu strictly forbade Erlang from wandering the streets unnecessarily. "We can't let those coarse jianghu women get tempted," Uncle Xu warned.

Xu Qi'an immediately grasped Uncle Xu’s real point: _Erlang should stay at home, while I, as his father, will handle those temptresses._

“Uncle, have any famous female heroes arrived in the capital recently?” Xu Qi'an asked, noticing Auntie and Xu Lingyue's suspicious looks. He quickly added, “I'm just asking to prevent trouble.”

Auntie and Xu Lingyue then turned to Uncle Xu, who frowned and complained, “You rascal! How would I know about such things? Do you think I'd pay attention to that?”

Xu Erlang scoffed, unimpressed by his brother and father's antics.

After finishing breakfast, Xu Qi'an and his uncle set off together, leading their horses. Uncle Xu patted the mare and remarked, “Since you started riding her, she seems to have more energy.”

“She's been well cared for,” Xu Qi'an replied.

“Huh?” Uncle Xu looked puzzled.

“I mean, the Nightwatcher's office feeds her high-quality grains—barley, soybeans, eggs, and coarse salt,” Xu Qi'an explained.

Hearing this, Uncle Xu grew envious. “Let's switch horses. Send mine to the Nightwatchers to improve her diet.”

Xu Qi'an waved his hands quickly. “I'm not switching.”

“Let's get back to talking about the female heroes, Uncle,” Xu Qi'an said eagerly, driven by his fascination with the jianghu, perhaps a remnant of his past life.

Uncle Xu smiled knowingly. “They say the capital is full of beautiful wanderers, but the most outstanding ones are four in particular. First, there's the daughter of the head of the Luya Sword Pavilion, known as the ‘Butterfly Sword.’ Not only is her cultivation exceptional, but she's also stunningly beautiful.

“Then there's Liu Qingyang from Hongxiang Pavilion, nicknamed the ‘Soul-Stealing Hand.’ From what my colleagues say, she's a seductress no man can resist.”

Soul-Stealing Hand?!

Xu Qi'an's thoughts immediately jumped to a more indecent interpretation of the nickname.

“Then there's a female thief known as the ‘Thousand-Faced Thief.’ No one knows what she really looks like, as she's a master of disguise. She always appears as an exquisite beauty.”

Usually, that meant she was probably not attractive.

“And finally, there's a famous female swordswoman who wields twin sabres. She's a disciple of the Shuangdao Sect from Leizhou. A real hero of the martial world. If I were twenty years younger... I'd still choose your Auntie,” Uncle Xu concluded.

Xu Qi'an nodded, sensing Uncle Xu's deep affection for Auntie. Patting his uncle on the shoulder, he said, “Leave those female martial artists to your twenty-year-younger nephew.”

Upon reaching the Nightwatchers constabulary, Xu Qi'an completed the morning roll call and then practiced breathing techniques at Silver Gong Minshan's hall for half an hour. He planned to patrol the streets with his two Bronze Gongs afterward—Spring Breeze Hall had burned down, and the reconstruction was still incomplete.

"Boss, where should we patrol today?" one of the Bronze Gongs asked.

"Do you know where the female martial artists usually hang out?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Naturally, at the Heroic Platforms! The four platforms in the outer city are lively these days. Even citizens from the inner city are flocking there to watch the excitement."

"Alright, we'll head to the southern Heroic Platform today," Xu Qi'an decided.

Just as he was leaving the office, he saw a rider approaching at full gallop. The rider, dressed in the palace's livery, was one of Lin'an's guards.

"Sir Xu!"

The guard, overjoyed to see Xu Qi'an, yanked his horse to a sudden stop.

"Sir Xu, the Second Princess urgently summons you to the palace!"

"What's going on?" Xu Qi'an asked calmly.

"The Second Princess says it's a matter of life and death. Her fate is now in your hands," the guard said gravely.

"???"

As Xu Qi'an instructed the Bronze Gongs to fetch his horse, he asked, "Has something happened in the palace?"

Chapter 272. Another Purse

The guard did not respond, his face showing hesitation.

He was just a small guard, how could he dare to interfere in palace matters?

Xu Qi'an did not press further, glancing around before asking, "Zhongli?"

"I understand, I'll head back to the Sitianjian first," Zhongli peeked out from behind the wall and obediently said.

"Will... anything happen on your way back?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"Let's, let's leave it to fate," Zhongli stammered nervously.

The guard scrutinized the woman in a linen robe with dishevelled hair, sensing a pitiable aura that made her seem particularly endearing.

Clip-clop, clip-clop...

Soon, a Bronze Gong returned with a small mare. Xu Qi'an patted the mare's mane, and she snorted and nudged her owner.

"Let me give you a blessing," Xu Qi'an said, patting Zhongli's head.

She had made several solo trips back to the Sitianjian before without incident. Xu Qi'an estimated that while minor trouble might arise, nothing major would occur. After all, the Sitianjian wasn't far from here—perhaps only half an hour's ride.

Mounting his beloved mare, Xu Qi'an rode alongside the guard from Shaoyin Courtyard and headed toward the imperial city.

The guard swung his whip to clear the way, occasionally glancing at Silver Gong Xu. This favoured attendant of the Princess showed no expression, his gaze focused on the road ahead. Though he was silent, there was a certain gravity between his brows.

Emperor Yuanjing's harem must be in utter chaos. The Empress, seeking to avenge her brother's death, would not spare Noble Consort Chen—no, now it was just Consort Chen. And the latter had long harboured deep resentment toward the Empress, treating her as a sworn enemy for many years...

Dammit, why do I, a lowly Silver Gong, have to worry about Emperor Yuanjing's family matters? It's all because your daughters are so beautiful, Xu Qi'an cursed internally.

They galloped swiftly into the imperial city, where they were stopped by the Yulin Guards at the palace gate. While the Princess's guard was allowed to enter as part of their normal duties, he did not have the authority to bring people in.

Xu Qi'an presented the jade token that Biaobiao had given him earlier, and immediately, one of the Yulin Guards came over to lead him inside.

According to palace protocol, when an outsider was summoned to the palace, a Yulin Guard had to accompany them to ensure they didn't wander.

The journey was silent as they passed through palace gates, crossed squares, and walked through palace walls until they finally arrived at Shaoyin Courtyard, where Lin'an resided.

The Yulin Guard waited outside the courtyard, while Biaobiao's personal guards led Xu Qi'an inside. After crossing the front yard, they entered the reception hall, where he saw Lin'an.

Second Princess Lin'an was still in her intricate red gown, her hair adorned with elaborate gold hairpins, agate clasps, and even a small phoenix coronet that was not entirely proper according to palace rules.

Her round, delicate face and charming peach-blossom eyes were expressionless as she sat there, resembling an Eastern version of a finely crafted Lolita doll.

Seeing that she was unharmed, Xu Qi'an exhaled silently. "Your Highness, what's wrong?"

Lin'an waved her hand to dismiss the guards and handmaidens, leaving only Xu Qi'an.

Biaobiao stared at him for a moment, then suddenly burst into tears, her voice full of grievance as she sobbed, "Huaiqing wants to kill me!"

... I think I understand now! Xu Qi'an sighed.

I knew it—Lin'an, being Emperor Yuanjing's most beloved daughter, wouldn't have any real danger. It turns out this so-called life-threatening crisis was just this.

"You went to provoke the Eldest Princess again, didn't you?"

While crying, Biaobiao glared at him. "What do you mean I went to provoke her? You need to explain yourself!"

Xu Qi'an rephrased, "Did Second Princess go to uphold justice with Princess Huaiqing again?"

Biaobiao gave a firm "hmm," sniffled, and said, "The Empress, that wicked woman, wants to kill mother consort. I went to confront Huaiqing, but who would have thought she's heartless too? She even hit me."

"Hit you?" Xu Qi'an frowned, scrutinizing Lin'an. "Where?"

"She whipped me with a cane."

Biaobiao rolled up her sleeve, revealing a section of her pale, tender arm. Two faint whip marks marred her snowy skin.

"Outrageous!"

Xu Qi'an was furious, shaking his head in anger like a hero lamenting the injustice of the world. The shame of Lin'an remains unavenged, how could this minister's wrath ever subside?

"Your Highness, rest assured. I will seek justice for you. I will not spare Huaiqing."

"There's no need for you to act..."

Seeing Xu Qi'an's righteous fury and a demeanor of loyalty that suggested he would die for her honor, Biaobiao was moved. She said, "After all, Huaiqing is still a princess. If you attack her privately, the palace guards will shoot you down."

Thank heavens, Your Highness, your intelligence is still intact... Xu Qi'an shook his head and said gravely, "If a single hair of yours were harmed, it would be an unbearable humiliation to me. Even if it costs me my life, I must seek revenge on Huaiqing."

Biaobiao slowly nodded, sniffled, and said, "I summoned you to the palace today precisely for this matter. I've been thinking: at the time, I could have resisted, I could have scratched Huaiqing's face. But I hesitated. Upon reflection, it must be because I lacked a capable bodyguard. You'll come with me to Huaiqing's Chunteng Courtyard again."

... Xu Qi'an's expression froze, feeling like he had just shot himself in the foot.

Cough cough!

He cleared his throat. "Your Highness, please calm down and tell me what happened, so I can consider the situation carefully."

Consider how to quietly slip away... he thought to himself.

Biaobiao then recounted, in great detail, the harem's infighting after the conclusion of the Consort Fu case.

As expected, the Empress despised Noble Consort Chen, constantly finding fault with her. It was only now that everyone realized the Empress was truly skilled in the eighteen arts of palace scheming—she just hadn't had the opportunity to use them before.

Every day, at the break of dawn, the Empress summoned Consort Chen to pay her respects and mercilessly criticized her, instructing her maids to "rebuke" her, making her the laughingstock of the palace.

There were also kneeling punishments, and corporal punishment using the rattan rod.

"Do you think the Empress is venomous?" Biaobiao pounded the table in fury as she spoke of her hatred.

Your mother killed her brother, of course the Empress would want revenge... though the Imperial Uncle deserved his fate. Xu Qi'an frowned. "Is there more?"

"Of course! Just yesterday, my mother suddenly got poisoned and was on the verge of death. The servants from Jinxiu Palace rushed to call for an imperial physician, but who would've guessed? The imperial physician was taken away by servants from Fengqi Palace."

"What? What happened then?" Xu Qi'an was shocked.

Biaobiao still had lingering fear as she said, "Fortunately, my mother had antidote pills stored in her palace. That's the only reason she survived."

Xu Qi'an let out a meaningful "oh."

The poisoning must have been a ruse by Consort Chen, intended to frame the Empress. But the Empress, grieving for her brother, chose to retaliate head-on by intercepting the imperial physician, forcing Consort Chen to resort to her own antidotes.

"What did His Majesty think of all this?" he asked.

"Father didn't say anything." Biaobiao frowned, snorting with frustration to express her dissatisfaction.

Hmm, Emperor Yuanjing must be well aware of everything. He's just letting them fight it out... though perhaps it's not entirely accurate to say he's doing nothing—at least I don't see any signs of Duke Wei's involvement. If he had intervened, Consort Chen might already be done for.

Xu Qi'an speculated that Emperor Yuanjing had probably issued a private warning to Wei Yuan.

My women fighting each other is my business. You, an outsider, are not to interfere!

Xu Qi'an thought Emperor Yuanjing was a scoundrel. Compared to that man, he felt much better about himself, since he was actively dealing with the back palace's firestorm.

After mulling it over for a moment, Xu Qi'an cautiously asked, "Why is the Empress targeting Consort Chen? Does Your Highness know?"

Biaobiao pretended not to hear, her eyes flickering with a trace of sadness.

Xu Qi'an understood and sighed inwardly.

"Let's go. I'm going to teach Huaiqing a lesson."

With that, Lin'an pulled a rattan cane from under the desk.

You were already prepared!! Xu Qi'an was dumbfounded.

"Your Highness, please calm down..."

Just as he was about to persuade her, Lin'an pouted and glared at him. "I know your heart sides with Huaiqing."

"Nonsense!"

Xu Qi'an reacted dramatically, pounding his chest. "Let's go, then!"

The two of them, along with their maids and guards, stormed toward Huaiqing's Chunteng Courtyard.

In the warm morning sunlight, trees sprouted new buds. Princess Huaiqing, dressed in a simple palace gown, sat in a pavilion, holding a scroll in her hands. Her back was graceful, her posture upright, and her black hair contrasted with her white dress, giving off an air of elegant scholarly grace.

Xu Qi'an and Lin'an marched up with fierce determination, but the serene Princess Huaiqing seemed oblivious, engrossed in her reading. In a cool tone, she gave orders to her guards:

"If any idle people disturb my reading, kill them without mercy."

Several guards, their hands resting on their swords, stepped forward, matching Lin'an's intensity. They dared not lay a hand on the princess but shifted their hostility to Xu Qi'an, making it clear that he was an expendable target.

Xu Qi'an immediately halted his steps.

Seeing him forced to retreat, Lin'an lost half her courage. Without her lackey to back her up, she definitely wouldn't dare challenge Huaiqing on her own.

Pointing her cane at Huaiqing, Lin'an shouted, "Huaiqing, get out here!"

"Huaiqing, come out right now!"

"You shameless Huaiqing, if you have the guts, come and face me!"

Huaiqing paid no attention whatsoever, continuing to read her book with evident enjoyment.

A quarter of an hour later, Lin'an and Xu Qi'an slinked away, tails between their legs.

Glancing back at Lin'an, who was grinding her teeth in frustration, Xu Qi'an sighed and said, "Let it go, Your Highness. The gap is too big."

The gap in intelligence was simply too vast.

With just a simple command, Huaiqing had already broken the confrontation.

It's probably for the best, sparing me an awkward situation... Huaiqing is really my protective little shield, helping me resolve this situation... but actually hitting Lin'an might be a little far...

Xu Qi'an thought appreciatively.

Lin'an, however, was not satisfied, stamping her feet in frustration, her bright red dress swishing in agitation.

After escorting Lin'an back to Shaoyin Courtyard, playing a few rounds of Five-in-a-Row with her, and telling her some stories, Xu Qi'an finally excused himself near midday.

As an official from outside the palace and Lin'an being an unmarried princess, he couldn't linger too long, much less dine with her.

"Next time, I'll summon you to the palace again," Lin'an said.

She couldn't frequently call an external official to the palace either, as that could spark rumors.

Exiting the palace gate, Xu Qi'an retrieved his mare from the Yulin Guards and rode her out of the city with a clip-clop.

The conflict between the Empress and Consort Chen is clearly irreconcilable. Consort Chen, unable to defeat the Empress on her own, will undoubtedly incite Lin'an, using her as a tool against the Empress.

According to Huaiqing, Lin'an was even more foolish in her younger years. Whenever Consort Chen pointed, Lin'an would charge in that direction. If Huaiqing didn't retaliate, she would only get bullied; but if she fought back, Lin'an would end up getting beaten. And this was precisely what Consort Chen enjoyed seeing.

Because Lin'an is favoured, if she gets bullied, Emperor Yuanjing won't stand idly by... If Lin'an gets bullied again, today's situation is bound to repeat itself.

As a king of the sea, I can't let the situation get out of hand. I need to think of a solution... think of a way...

Even after returning to the Nightwatchers Constabulary, Xu Qi'an had yet to come up with a solution. Frustrated, he smacked the mare's flank. It was all her fault for trotting so bouncily, preventing him from settling his thoughts.

After lunch, Xu Qi'an took two Bronze Gongs with him to patrol the outer city. The distance was too great to walk, so they had to ride.

Xu Qi'an was most familiar with the southern city, where his family's old residence was located. There was also a welfare hall here, Number Six Hengyuan's turf.

Sigh, I wonder when my 'European emperor luck' will return. I still have to regularly send silver to Master Hengyuan for his charity work...

With that thought, Xu Qi'an felt even more dejected.

...

The white marble arena in the southern part of the city was built in the plaza by the river. In just two or three days, the surface of the arena was already pockmarked with countless footprints from duels and cracks left by slashes of blades and strikes of axes.

On the stage, two jianghu folk were engaged in a fierce fight. One was a burly, muscular man wielding an iron staff, while the other was a young swordsman with decent looks.

The two exchanged blows with great enthusiasm, much to the delight of the spectators.

A crowd had gathered around the stage, including curious onlookers and some more experienced martial artists.

Regarding weapons, ordinary martial artists would have to hand over their weapons when entering the city. The constabulary would issue a voucher, which could be used to retrieve their weapons

when leaving. However, since the arenas appeared, the constabulary relaxed this rule. Martial artists wanting to fight could request their weapons back, but they were required to return them the next day or be wanted city wide.

For young heroes and heroines from prestigious sects, their sect's endorsement allowed them to keep their weapons, but if they committed crimes, the sect would be held responsible.

Xu Qi'an scanned the area but didn't spot any particularly outstanding heroines.

"Sir Xu, the people watching out here are just commoners. Those with status are watching from the nearby teahouses and taverns," explained one of the Bronze Gongs.

You're quite knowledgeable, little brother... Xu Qi'an glanced at the nearby teahouses and taverns and saw that many spectators were indeed watching from the second-floor balconies.

"Let's go. We'll find ourselves a tavern as well... that one over there will do," Xu Qi'an said, spotting an especially beautiful heroine.

Just as he was about to take a step forward, his foot hit something hard. Looking down, he saw a small purse.

The purse was light green, embroidered with matching patterns and a delicate orchid, exuding a faint, fragrant scent. It was clearly a woman's personal item.

"Huh?"

Xu Qi'an paused in surprise. _Wasn't my money-finding buff 404ed by that old Jianzheng?_

"Wow, it feels pretty heavy too."

With a smile, Xu Qi'an pocketed the pouch. He then noticed a child nearby staring at him, clearly upset that someone else had found the pouch first.

"What are you looking at? Whose child are you?" Xu Qi'an raised his hand as if to hit him. The child, frightened, immediately turned and ran.

Xu Qi'an burst out laughing. _You're way too timid. I was planning to buy you a candied hawthorn stick._

Entering the tavern, Xu Qi'an found a table on the second floor and ordered food and drinks. He wasn't interested in the fight on the stage, so he narrowed his eyes and began to size up the heroine at the next table.

She wore a pink gauze dress that revealed her fair neck and delicate collarbone. The thin fabric accentuated her impressive chest. Her clothing was bold, her makeup elaborate, with bright red lips and large almond-shaped eyes that sparkled with life. Though her features were naturally beautiful, it was her seductive charm that truly captured men's attention.

If Biaobiao was a dignified little queen of the club, this woman was the true queen of the club.

The seductive woman noticed Xu Qi'an's brazen stare but wasn't angered. Instead, she threw him a flirtatious glance, causing the young men at her table to look over.

Seeing that Xu Qi'an wore the Nightwatcher's uniform, they quickly pretended nothing had happened and turned their heads back.

The waiter arrived, bringing dishes like beef, peanuts, lamb, and a jar of fine wine.

"Sirs, here's your food and drink. Enjoy."

"Waiter, bring a jar of your finest 82-year-old Lafite to that table. It's on me." Xu Qi'an winked at the seductive woman.

The waiter looked confused, not understanding the reference.

"A jar of Chunyi Nong," Xu Qi'an corrected himself, naming the most expensive wine in the tavern.

"Right away."

Noticing Xu Qi'an's interaction with the "goddess," the young men at her table grew jealous but didn't dare challenge the Nightwatcher. Instead, they took it out on the waiter.

"Waiter, we'll have five more pounds of beef."

"I'm sorry, but we don't have that much left."

"Why do they get two pounds, but we only get one pound with so many of us?"

Beef was a luxury item in this era, usually coming from old or sick cows that had to be slaughtered with official approval. The tavern had limited stock, and Xu Qi'an's table had already ordered two pounds.

The waiter rolled his eyes and said with the typical arrogance of a capital native, "They're officials. You clearly didn't check the mirror before leaving home this morning."

"..."

The two Bronze Gongs burst into laughter. "These guys are such fools."

Just then, Xu Qi'an noticed a woman climbing the stairs. She scanned the room and walked straight toward him, glaring down at him with fury in her eyes.

"Return my purse."

Chapter 273. Challenge a Silver Gong

The woman appeared to be in her thirties, with an average figure and plain looks.

Xu Qi'an had seen plenty of beautiful women in the same age range, such as Imperial Concubine Chen, the Empress, or even his own Auntie. In terms of both looks and figure, each one of them could easily outshine this woman.

However, she had a certain boldness, something these noblewomen lacked.

Spoiled... yes, that was the word—spoiled and headstrong.

It was rare to see this kind of temperament in an older woman.

Xu Qi'an understood now but denied it out loud: "What purse?"

"The pale green purse with twenty taels of gold inside." The woman pressed her hands on the table, leaning over Xu Qi'an with gritted teeth. "Give it back."

Gold—twenty taels of gold?! Xu Qi'an's heart skipped a beat, though he maintained a calm exterior, even feigning confusion. "Ma'am, what does your lost purse have to do with me?"

"Ma'am?!" she shrieked.

The woman's face turned bright red with anger, her ears flushed, and she glared at Xu Qi'an with eyes full of fury.

What kind of reaction is this? Doesn't she know how old she is? Xu Qi'an waved dismissively, trying to get rid of her. "I didn't pick up your purse, now go away."

The woman took a deep breath and turned around, shouting, "Come here!"

At the staircase, a child peeked out, the same one Xu Qi'an had scared off earlier, and the same one who had seen him pick up the purse.

"It was him! He picked up the purse and threatened me!" The child pointed at Xu Qi'an and loudly accused.

The surrounding customers turned their heads to look. Even the seductive woman glanced over with a smile, clearly enjoying the scene.

"Come here, kid." Xu Qi'an beckoned.

The child shook his head, keeping a wary eye on Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an took out a small piece of silver from his pocket, flicked it with his fingers, and the silver rolled over to the child. With a smile, he said, "Say that again. I didn't quite catch what you said earlier."

The child grinned widely as he picked up the silver, then loudly proclaimed, "I didn't see anything! I don't know anything!"

Xu Qi'an burst out laughing, "Go buy yourself some candied hawthorns."

The child happily ran downstairs.

The two Bronze Gongs laughed along with him, casting teasing glances at the plain-looking woman.

The surrounding patrons lost interest in the drama and returned their focus to the fighters on the stage. Even newcomers to the capital knew that Nightwatchers were not to be trifled with. This woman was clearly ignorant of the local power dynamics.

Forget about someone picking up your purse—if a Nightwatcher decided to take you into a private room, and you didn't have any backing, there'd be nothing you could do about it.

The woman stared at Xu Qi'an for a moment, then suddenly smiled, a smile that carried an unexpected hint of charm.

She calmly sat down, picked up the unused utensils on the table, and began eating as if nothing had happened. She seemed genuinely hungry, eating quickly at first. Once her hunger was satisfied, her eating became more refined.

After drinking a cup of wine, she glanced at Xu Qi'an and sneered, "Hmm, this Sir won't tie me up and drag me to the constabulary?"

Xu Qi'an replied calmly, "Ma'am, it's just a few bites of food. No need for that."

This woman must have been hungry. When she couldn't find her purse, she retraced her steps and ended up here.

Ma'am... She gritted her teeth again.

"Hmph, I bet he's just some privileged brat riding on his elders' achievements. How else could he be a Silver Gong at such a young age?" a young swordsman at the next table whispered bitterly.

The middle-aged woman, hearing this, glanced provocatively at Xu Qi'an.

"Exactly. Anyone who would covet a mere purse from an older woman must not be a good person," another young man muttered.

The woman, expressionless, said, "You're a Silver Gong after all. Don't you feel angry when others slander you behind your back?"

This woman is quite petty... Xu Qi'an smiled and asked, "What do you think I should do?"

The woman snapped, "Lock them all up in the Nightwatcher's prison."

The young men overheard her, but they didn't dare argue and fell silent. In the end, they didn't want to provoke a Nightwatcher.

"That would be excessive. They're just gossiping a little." Xu Qi'an added, "Besides, they look pretty poor. One could hardly squeeze a few taels of silver out of them."

The young men were furious but dared not speak.

The woman stopped paying attention to Xu Qi'an. She sipped her wine and ate her food in small bites, clearly enjoying the battle unfolding on the stage.

Xu Qi'an didn't chase her away because he found her far more interesting than she appeared.

To be clear, her appearance was indeed ordinary—no alluring curves, no stunning beauty.

However, her status was likely not as ordinary. Regular people didn't carry so much silver on them. Twenty taels of silver was roughly equivalent to a year's savings for a common family.

If it was gold, even a small amount would be a fortune beyond imagination.

As for this middle-aged woman, she wore simple clothes, her hair neatly tied with a wooden hairpin. To put it in modern terms, she was dressed like a bargain hunter from a street market, nothing costing more than a hundred yuan.

Yet this ordinary woman didn't seem overly upset about losing such a large sum of money. Instead, she was more angry at the dishonesty of the Nightwatcher than at the loss itself.

Is that the demeanor of a commoner?

Twenty taels of silver—if it were Xu Qi'an, he'd be fighting tooth and nail with anyone who dared take his money.

And if it were twenty taels of gold, well, Jack Ma himself would be calling the police.

"This Sir, may I have the honour of sharing a drink with you?"

At that moment, the seductive woman holding a cup of wine swayed her hips as she approached with a sultry smile.

Xu Qi'an noticed for the first time that she was wearing a tight-fitting dress, with a ribbon highlighting her slim waist. That figure... impressive...

He instinctively glanced at the plain woman beside him. She was dressed much more conservatively, wearing thick, modest clothing. And given her age, it was unlikely her figure would be anything worth noting.

"Of course."

Xu Qi'an quickly gestured for her to sit, but there was a problem—there were only four seats, all occupied. The woman with the seductive almond-shaped eyes looked around, unwilling to take a seat.

Not daring to offend the two Bronze Gongs, she turned her soft gaze toward the plain woman, laughing lightly, "Madam..."

The plain woman snapped her head around, her gaze sharp and aggressive. After sizing up the alluring woman, she let out a disdainful "hmp" and turned back to watching the fight.

What was that look? The way she just looked at me was full of disdain... The seductive woman narrowed her eyes. This was the first time another woman had looked at her that way.

Wherever she went, men's gazes followed her.

Every move she made was filled with allure in the eyes of men, enchanting them and capturing their hearts.

Women envied her, hated her, and gossiped about her behind her back.

But this older woman had just looked at her with open disdain.

Xu Qi'an glanced at the Bronze Gong on his left. The Bronze Gong was quite perceptive, immediately grabbing his sabre and respectfully saying, "Sir, your subordinate will now patrol the streets."

Xu Qi'an nodded with a smile and gestured courteously, "Miss Heroine, please have a seat."

The alluring woman smiled charmingly and gracefully sat down, pressing her dress down as she did.

She had been observing Xu Qi'an for a long time. This man was an interesting prey: handsome, with finely sculpted features, eyes that sparkled like stars, and a sharp, resolute gaze.

His tall nose and thick, dark sword-like eyebrows complemented his chiseled, masculine face, exuding a strong sense of masculinity.

What intrigued her even more was his status as a Silver Gong. To have reached such a position at a young age, he was either extraordinarily talented or had influential family connections.

Either way, he was worth getting close to.

"I haven't had the pleasure of knowing Sir's name," she said.

"Xu Qi'an... And your name, Miss?" Xu Qi'an responded.

"Rongrong."

Miss Rongrong, huh? Do you have a title, by chance...? Xu Qi'an smiled and said, "A lovely name, like that of a celestial beauty, befitting such a heavenly person."

Miss Rongrong giggled, covering her mouth and added, "I also have another title — people call me 'Soul-Stealing Hand.'"

Xu Qi'an put down his wine cup and sized up Miss Rongrong. She didn't mind his brazen gaze; on the contrary, she straightened her chest.

"I've heard much about you."

Xu Qi'an thought to himself, *Am I really so lucky today? Just this morning, my second uncle told me about the four most beautiful lady heroes in the capital, and by noon, I've already run into one.*

"Ahem!"

He set down his wine cup and introduced himself, "So it's the famous 'Soul-Stealing Hand' Miss Rongrong. Let me reintroduce myself. I'm Xu Qi'an, and my uncle serves in the Imperial Yudao Guard."

Upon hearing this, Miss Rongrong felt a little disappointed.

While the Yudao Guard was one of the five guard garrisons in the capital, the level of power an office held was determined by its rank, and the Yudao Guard was not a particularly prominent post.

But Xu Qi'an's next words changed her perspective.

"My uncle once served under Duke Wei and earned numerous merits during the Battle of Shanhai Pass. It's due to that connection that I managed to secure a minor official position in the Nightwatchers.

"King Yu is also my father's close friend. My father, the Earl, passed away early, and we didn't manage to secure a hereditary peerage. So now, I'm just a small Viscount."

Uncle was a trusted confidant of Duke Wei, father was a close friend of King Yu, and Xu Qi'an himself was both a Silver Gong and a Viscount... Miss Rongrong was taken aback and stared at Xu Qi'an without blinking her beautiful eyes.

She had heard stories about the many nobles in the capital, where you could casually bump into someone and find out they held an official title.

But how many officials could compare to Duke Wei in power? How many titles could be more prestigious than that of King Yu?

In an instant, Miss Rongrong became even more enthusiastic.

In his past life, Xu Qi'an had spent a lot of time in nightclubs for work purposes and had grown skilled at dealing with women like this. He wasn't interested in her body; he simply enjoyed the familiar feeling of the game.

Occasionally throwing in a suggestive remark or teasing her a little, this so-called Miss Rongrong, with the title "Soul-Stealing Hand," didn't seem to mind.

If she had been a proper lady, she would have already blushed and spat at him, saying, Shameless rogue!

If she were a little more fiery, a 24k titanium alloy slap would have landed on his face by now.

At that moment, Rongrong turned her gaze to the arena, asking a question that was half inquisitive, half testing him: "What does Sir Xu think? Who will win?"

"Obviously, the young swordsman will win," Xu Qi'an replied without hesitation.

"Even a fool can see that," the older lady huffed, inserting herself into the conversation.

The young swordsman had been dominating the axe-wielding man from the start, his swordplay refined and precise, eliciting cheers from the onlookers from time to time.

"Before reaching the Refining Qi stage, physical strength determines superiority. The axe-wielding man is clearly stronger and more physically imposing than the young swordsman. So why is he losing? The swordsman's techniques are merely for show," Xu Qi'an explained.

The older lady didn't respond, but she was clearly paying close attention.

"My guess is that he's an actor," Xu Qi'an revealed the truth.

"An actor?"

Miss Rongrong hadn't heard that term before.

"It means he's just putting on a performance," Xu Qi'an clarified.

Rongrong suddenly understood and admired him, saying, "I see. Sir Xu has sharp eyes indeed."

She deliberately displayed a look of admiration in her gaze.

She's quite the seasoned player... Xu Qi'an thought, but he didn't expose her. Instead, he grinned smugly in return.

Miss Rongrong was skilled, keeping her true strength hidden, definitely not someone to be underestimated. She had likely seen through the charade on the stage long ago. Only the middle-aged lady still hadn't figured it out and remained doubtful about Xu Qi'an's words.

At that moment, the young swordsman on stage parried the man's axe with his sword, then kicked him squarely in the chest. The man's axe flew out of his hands and off the stage.

After that, no one else came forward to compete for quite some time.

"I'm full. Give me back my purse," the old lady reluctantly tore her gaze away from the stage and glared at Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an pretended not to hear. She didn't push the matter, instead staring at him for a long time before silently getting up and heading downstairs.

"She's got quite the figure," the remaining Bronze Gong commented wistfully.

After speaking, he realized both Xu Qi'an and Miss Rongrong were looking at him with disdain.

"Were you deprived of maternal affection as a child or something?"

Xu Qi'an patted the young Bronze Gong on the shoulder, then reached into his robe and pulled out a light green purse. He opened it to reveal several bright golden ingots.

"Wow, it really is gold!" The Bronze Gong's eyes widened with joy. "Sir, we've struck it rich!"

Xu Qi'an tied up the purse's tassel and said, "Forget about ill-gotten gains like this."

With a light toss, he threw the purse out of the window.

Immediately after, a woman's scream came from below. The purse had squarely on the middle-aged woman's toes. She squatted down, her skirt spreading out, tears welling in her eyes as she looked up at the second floor, gnashing her teeth in anger.

"Ma'am, you'd better go home," Xu Qi'an kindly advised.

The old lady bit her lip, picked up the purse, and limped away.

...

Xu Qi'an continued his verbal sparring with Miss Rongrong. Both were trying to reel each other into their respective "ponds." Women like her, who flirted shamelessly and cultivated admirers, were ancient equivalents of modern-day "green tea"s.

Xu Qi'an hadn't encountered a "green tea" woman in a long time and was thoroughly enjoying the exchange.

About a quarter of an hour later, a furious roar erupted from the direction of the arena: "Xu Qi'an, get down here, you coward!"

"???"

Xu Qi'an looked out in confusion and saw a burly man dressed in coarse cloth standing on the stage. The man was eight feet tall, with a bushy beard and eyes like bronze bells.

Standing proudly on the stage, he exuded a powerful aura.

Even the onlookers could sense that this man's presence was entirely different from the other fighters.

Xu Qi'an was bewildered. *Who the hell are you?*

"Does Sir Xu know him?" Miss Rongrong asked, her red lips pursing slightly in worry as she eyed the man.

Xu Qi'an shook his head. "No idea."

"Then just ignore him," Miss Rongrong said softly. "That man's body gleams with a divine glow — he's an expert in the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones realm... Sir Xu surely wouldn't be afraid of him, but with so many commoners around, a fight might harm the innocent."

Her words were tactful, allowing Xu Qi'an to save face. But Miss Rongrong knew full well that ten Xu Qi'ans wouldn't be able to take on this master.

After all, Xu Qi'an had secured his Silver Gong title due to his family background.

"Nightwatcher Silver Gong Xu Qi'an, get out here and kneel to apologize, or your old man will crush your balls today!" The man roared.

The crowd immediately erupted in shock and excitement.

So Xu Qi'an was a Nightwatcher — and a Silver Gong at that? Finally, so many days after the Heroic Platforms' construction, someone was challenging the pigs!

The young heroes at nearby tables were stunned, then quickly turned to look at Xu Qi'an.

Their expressions were almost identical: gloating delight.

"Come out and call me Daddy! Kowtow and apologize, or I'll shout every day until you do. Nightwatcher Silver Gong Xu Qi'an, your father is calling — son, get out here!"

The man's loud, booming voice echoed throughout the area, drawing even more people from nearby taverns and teahouses to witness the spectacle.

...

Chapter 274. Thief!

Xu Qi'an stood up and approached the balcony. With one hand resting on the railing, he squinted as he scrutinised the man on the stage.

He was certain that he did not know this loudmouthed warrior, nor could he recall having an enemy at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage.

Enemies don't appear out of nowhere. I just can't remember who it might be... Xu Qi'an stroked his chin, pondering who might be targeting him.

As a person, he always upheld the principles of kindness and persuading others through virtue.

As an official, he adhered to the creed of being upright and just, serving the country and the people.

Such a good man shouldn't have enemies.

Consort Chen is a devious woman. If she wanted revenge on me, she would prefer assassination, not such a grand spectacle... As for the court officials, while certain factions may wish me dead, this doesn't seem to align with the style of the scholars...

"He's scared."

"No shit. That's a Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert. With that skinny body of his, one punch would obliterate him."

"That's why those pampered boys who rely on their family's influence can strut around the capital, but when they meet real experts, they're nothing."

To the young heroes at the table across from him, Xu Qi'an's "hesitation" seemed like fear and cowardice.

They immediately felt a sense of schadenfreude, their thoughts akin to bringing a stunning 9/10 beauty to a club, only for some rich Master Zhao to appear, declaring, "Tonight, Master Zhao will foot the bill!"

The 9/10 beauty, swayed by Zhao's wealth, throws herself into his arms... And just as this happens, with a thunderous crash from the heavens, the real big boss descends, slapping Zhao across the face and saying:

"You're not worthy!"

Although it wasn't the young heroes delivering the slap, the scene still filled them with glee. Watching a silver-spooned officer from the constabulary get humiliated and lose face hit their sweet spot.

At this point, they all turned to look at Miss Rongrong, eager to see disappointment in her eyes, to witness the moment when a pampered noble lost his shine.

And then she'd remember that they were the true promising candidates, and switch her attention to them.

But Miss Rongrong clearly wasn't as shallow as the young heroes imagined. She showed a look of genuine concern, even though the Silver Gong, who was all but handsome and nothing more, had his back to her.

Just then, Xu Qi'an turned around, placing one hand on the hilt of his sword, and said, "This official shall meet him."

"Hey!"

Miss Rongrong suddenly moved closer, lightly tugging Xu Qi'an's arm. Before he could frown, she released him, offering a sheepish smile. "Why bother with a mere commoner?"

Xu Qi'an ignored her, shaking his head as he made his way downstairs.

"Even if you have incredible backing, shouldn't you at least get some help first? Going up there like this is just asking for a beating," Miss Rongrong muttered.

Leaving the tavern, Xu Qi'an walked towards the stage, lightly flicking his thumb, releasing a sliver of Qi.

The Bronze Skin and Iron Bones warrior, along with the Jianghu guests in the crowd, immediately sensed it and turned to look. Upon seeing Xu Qi'an in his Silver Gong uniform, they understood.

The main player had arrived.

They instinctively stepped aside.

But the common folk watching had no such awareness and continued to block the way.

"Move it!"

Xu Qi'an spotted a man in simple clothes and delivered a fierce kick, sending him fleeing in panic. Only then did the commoners shrink back in fear, creating a path.

"Move, all of you!"

Xu Qi'an removed his sword sheath, striking anyone in his way, regardless of age or gender.

"Everyone, back up ten zhang. Do not approach... Hey, old man, don't think your age gives you an excuse. Want to taste a slap from the younger generation?"

"Whose brat is this? If no one takes him away, I'll sell him... Why are you crying? Do you want me to kick you? Auntie, have you made lunch yet? Washed the dishes? Why are you here for the

spectacle... What's wrong with hitting you? If you were twenty years younger, I'd sell you to a brothel!"

Back at the tavern, on the balcony.

The young heroes, hands resting on the railing, watched as Xu Qi'an bullied the common folk, their faces filled with righteous indignation.

"This scum, taking out his anger on the people."

"If you have the guts, fight on the stage! Bullying commoners—what kind of Nightwatcher is he?"

"Just a weakling."

With Xu Qi'an gone, they could vent freely.

A young hero with fine features turned and walked over to Miss Rongrong, speaking softly, "Miss Rongrong, let's go back and drink. I'll tell you more about my teacher's adventures in the north, where he cut down countless barbarian tribes."

"Yeah, what's the point of drinking with that pampered second generation? Look at him, only bullying the common folk," the other young heroes echoed.

Miss Rongrong, seated calmly, scanned the group of young men and smiled gently. "You think he's bullying the commoners?"

"Is he not?" they retorted.

Miss Rongrong blinked and asked curiously, "Haven't you heard the Jianghu saying: when experts duel, bystanders retreat? It refers to the fact that the qi fluctuations of high-level martial artists can easily kill ordinary people. Surely, you knew that, right? Right? Right?"

... The young heroes' faces immediately flushed red.

"Then why not explain the situation outright? He's clearly just using this as an excuse to vent his frustrations on the people," the young hero who had invited Miss Rongrong stubbornly argued.

Miss Rongrong lowered her head, sipping her drink to hide the disdain in her eyes.

The common folk are incredibly ignorant. Explaining things to them kindly, do you think they'd listen? Do they even understand the saying "when experts duel, bystanders retreat"?

Not only are the common folk ignorant, but there are also plenty of ruffians among them. They only fear the authorities. Dealing with them with kind words is far less effective than using a large stick.

These young heroes, who came from decent families or had respectable sects, may sneer at others for relying on their ancestors' achievements, but they're not even as capable as Silver Gong Xu.

...

After driving away the oblivious civilians around the stage, Xu Qi'an leaped onto the platform, resting his hand on his blade, gazing down at the man who stood a head taller than him. He asked, "Whose man are you?"

"I'm your mother's man," the eight-foot-tall man sneered.

Oh, throwing insults at me? Fine, I'll spare his life for now and drag him to the Nightwatcher's dungeon. He'll talk eventually... Xu Qi'an hung his sword back at his waist, hand resting on the hilt, and said, "To deal with a mere sixth-rank ant like you, this official needs only one strike."

How arrogant!

The nearby martial artists were stunned. A sixth-rank martial artist was no small figure in the Jianghu, and in some counties, they would hold the position of a sect leader or local overlord. Even though the capital was filled with experts, including the legendary first-rank Arcanist, a sixth-rank warrior was not someone to be easily dismissed.

"Hahaha!"

The eight-foot man, with his muscular frame, laughed menacingly, "Not only will I crush your pathetic bones, but I'll also cut out your tongue and use it as a beer snack."

Back at the balcony, Miss Rongrong glanced at the Bronze Gong who continued eating and drinking without a care. She frowned and said, "Aren't you going to call for help?"

Even as his superior was about to be humiliated, he was still eating so casually. It was hard to believe he worked in the constabulary with such little regard for decorum.

"Relax!" The Bronze Gong waved dismissively. "It's just someone at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage. You have no idea how strong our Sir Xu really is."

"Is Sir Xu also at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones level?" Rongrong recalled, but quickly dismissed the thought. She had observed Xu Qi'an closely before, and he didn't show the unique glow associated with that stage.

The Bronze Gong smirked at the young martial artists nearby, "Sir Xu isn't at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones level, but there was a time when he was ambushed in the street by two Refining Spirit practitioners and one Bronze Skin expert. Want to guess what happened?"

Rongrong shook her head.

Obviously, nothing happened to him; Xu Qi'an was alive and well. She knew the Bronze Gong wasn't just talking about that.

"One strike!" The Bronze Gong held up one finger.

"What?"

The seductive Miss Rongrong didn't quite understand.

The Bronze Gong pointed outside. "See for yourself."

Bang!

The sound of the white jade floor of the stage cracking echoed across the area. Rongrong whipped around to see the eight-foot man shattering the platform beneath his feet, turning into a black blur.

On the other side, Xu Qi'an bent his knees slightly and lightly flicked his thumb.

Shing... The sound of the blade being drawn filled the entire space, clear and resonant.

With Rongrong's sharp eyes, she barely caught a glimpse of a dark-golden streak flash by, followed by a burst of sword energy scattering like invisible steel needles, puncturing shallow holes all over the ground and stage.

Had Xu Qi'an not driven the civilians away earlier, a good number of them would have been dead by now.

For the ordinary citizens and most martial artists watching, they only saw Xu Qi'an seem to draw his sword. When they looked again, the sword was already sheathed, firmly at his side.

But the towering man, who moments ago was full of swagger, had frozen in place—standing a full ten feet away from Xu Qi'an, staring down in disbelief at his own chest.

The next moment, a thin cut opened across his chest, blood gushing out.

The man slowly knelt to the ground, his face gradually paling.

Xu Qi'an coldly declared, "I said one strike, so it is one strike."

"Wow!"

The crowd erupted in noise, exactly as the onomatopoeia described.

Cheers followed swiftly, the commoners loudly applauding, their voices deafening. A few called out to fetch a doctor from the clinic.

Martial artists with some cultivation, however, saw the deeper meaning. After the initial shock, they collectively fell silent.

One strike!

One strike to shatter a Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert's body. This Silver Gong's strength was likely of the fifth rank, perhaps even higher.

"Nightwatcher Silver Gong Xu Qi'an..."

They silently committed the name to memory.

"Well? I didn't lie, did I?" The Bronze Gong laughed as he stood, glancing at the stunned Miss Rongrong. He said, "This is a prodigy handpicked by Duke Wei. A mere sixth-rank warrior is nothing. Even the officials in the imperial court treat Sir Xu with the utmost respect."

With that, he cast a mocking glance at the dumbfounded young martial artists and grabbed his blade, heading downstairs.

...

After cutting down the man, two Bronze Gongs immediately climbed onto the stage and asked for instructions. "What should we do with him?"

"Take him to the clinic to have his wounds treated, then bring him back to the Nightwatcher's constabulary. Make sure to seal his acupoints with bull-hair needles. Even a dying camel is bigger than a horse," Xu Qi'an ordered.

He glanced toward the restaurant but noticed that Miss Rongrong was gone.

“Where’s Miss Rongrong?” he asked.

“She was just here,” replied the Bronze Gong who had gone downstairs, turning around to check, only to confirm she was indeed missing.

This doesn’t make sense. I put on such a great show, she should’ve been swooning by now... Xu Qi’an thought with some regret.

Oh well, I wasn’t really planning on anything happening anyway.

Xu Qi’an led the severely injured man to a nearby clinic, had the doctor bandage him up, and then headed back to the Nightwatcher’s constabulary with the unconscious man in tow.

Halfway there, he suddenly felt something was off. He checked himself—his token, sword, and pouch were all still there.

Then he reached into his inner pocket and finally realised what was wrong.

The fragment of the Earth Book was gone.

“Sir, is something the matter?” asked the Bronze Gong riding alongside him, holding the unconscious man on horseback.

“Shut up!” Xu Qi’an closed his eyes, mentally retracing his steps.

His clothes weren’t torn, ruling out the possibility of losing the Earth Book fragment while walking. With his sharp hearing, he would have noticed it drop.

There had been no intense combat, only a single slash—so that wasn’t it either.

That left only one possibility: it had been stolen.

That Auntie was too simple-minded to pull this off... the only person who got close to me was Miss Rongrong, and she grabbed my arm right before I went downstairs...

Xu Qi’an snorted. *No wonder she left so abruptly earlier—it turns out she’s a damned thief! ‘Soul-stealing hands,’ huh? So that’s what it means.*

Since leaving the platform, half an hour had already passed. By now, she must have gotten far away. The capital was huge, and recovering his stolen item seemed a slim hope.

Out of all the things you could steal, you choose to steal the Earth Book. Well unlucky for you, this little baby has GPS positioning. Xu Qi’an smirked and instructed, “You take him back. I have something else to take care of.”

He needed to return to the scene and then seek out Daoist Jinlian.

Chapter 275. Another Person

At the same time, in the southern city, at the Heroic Platform.

A group of jianghu folk hurried over. They had heard the news that a Silver Gong had injured a Bronze Skin and Iron Bones martial artist with a single slash.

As people of the jianghu, they were naturally intrigued by such rumours, and being nearby, they immediately rushed over to satisfy their curiosity.

However, the conflict had already ended, and the crowd had mostly dispersed, leaving only a few idle onlookers loitering around.

This group of jianghu folk arrived at the Heroic Platform and observed the scene for a while, finding the rumors somewhat credible.

The reason? The platform was too well-preserved.

With the strength of a Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert, if the fight had been evenly matched, the damage would be obvious and clear. At the very least, the platform wouldn't have remained intact.

"Look here, and over there... what are these small holes?" one of the young heroes asked.

"They look like sword energy, sharp and fine. I've never heard of such a sword technique."

The speaker was an enchanting beauty, her bright almond-shaped eyes shining like autumn waters. Her lips were painted a vivid red, and though her makeup was a bit heavy, it did not appear vulgar. Instead, it added to her seductive allure.

The young hero who had asked the question nodded. If it had been caused by qi, the damage would have been more widespread and cracked.

The alluring woman turned her head toward another young hero and said with a charming smile, "What do you think, Young Master Liu?"

Young Master Liu had a handsome face, with blade-like eyebrows and starry eyes, carrying a Seven-Star Sword on his back.

In the capital, those who could carry weapons openly were people of status.

This Young Master Liu hailed from Jianzhou, a sacred land of martial arts in the Great Feng, from a sect called the "Ink Pavilion." Among this group of jianghu folk, his cultivation was the highest, making him the core of the group.

Most importantly, he was a swordsman.

"It might not necessarily be sword energy. These holes are unevenly distributed, as if ink was splattered. It seems more likely that sword or sabre energy scattered and shot in all directions," Young Master Liu said.

After speaking, he waved over an idle man, tossed him a small piece of silver, and asked, "I heard that a Silver Gong only made one move and injured his opponent?"

The idle man squeezed the silver between his fingers, his expression filled with flattery and joy, and he nodded repeatedly, bowing as he spoke, "You young masters missed quite the sight. That one slash was unbelievable..."

"The holes in the ground appeared right after that official drew his blade, like rain falling from the sky."

He vividly recounted what he had witnessed.

"The scattered blade energy... So the opponent was indeed a Bronze Skin and Iron Bones," the alluring woman nodded in agreement.

Only someone with that kind of body could survive such blade energy. A martial artist below the sixth rank would have been cleaved in two.

"From what I know, most of the Silver Gongs in the Nightwatchers' headquarters are of the Refining Spirit realm, with only a few at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones level," another young heroine commented.

She hailed from one of the thirteen counties under the capital's jurisdiction, making her a semi-local, and had some knowledge of the famous Nightwatchers.

"Does this count as the first clash between the constabulary's experts and the jianghu's martial artists? I'd love to witness the splendor of that blade," the alluring woman chuckled.

Just then, the sound of hooves reached their ears, and a young man dressed in the uniform of the Nightwatchers rode up on a swift horse.

The jianghu folk glanced at him briefly, assuming he was a Nightwatcher coming to inspect the scene, but what the young Nightwatcher did next left them both shocked and angry.

Clang!

The Nightwatcher drew his blade and charged at them on horseback.

Young Master Liu's expression shifted slightly. He stepped in front of his companions and patted his back, causing the Seven-Star Sword to clang out of its scabbard, spinning in the air to block the incoming blade.

The young Nightwatcher lightly flicked his wrist, and the Seven-Star Sword was cut in two, falling to the ground with a dull clang.

"You..."

Young Master Liu was both shocked and furious. His sect's gifted magical weapon had been destroyed, and the pain was unbearable.

Xu Qi'an pulled on the reins, pointed his blade at the alluring woman, and sneered, "How dare you come back, Miss Rongrong. After stealing this official's treasure, instead of hiding away, you have the audacity to return so brazenly. I guess you've never experienced the harshness of the world.

"I'm giving you two choices: one, hand over the treasure and become my concubine. Two, hand over the treasure, and I'll sell you to the Jiaofangsi."

She stole his treasure?!

The young heroes and heroines looked at the alluring woman in shock.

The notorious 'Soul-Stealing Hand,' Miss Rongrong, whose face was always adorned with a charming smile, faltered visibly. She frowned and subtly shook her head at her companions.

Forcing himself to ignore his broken sword, Young Master Liu cupped his fists and said, "Sir, you must be mistaken."

"Get lost!"

Xu Qi'an scrutinised Miss Rongrong. Her hairstyle, dress, and makeup were identical to before—there was no mistake.

"My patience is limited. I'll give you three breaths of time. If you don't hand over the treasure..." He let out a cold laugh.

The young heroes were enraged.

Miss Rongrong took a step forward, fearlessly facing Xu Qi'an's blade, and said softly, "Sir, I have never met you before, and I have no idea what treasure you are talking about. Please, explain clearly."

Seated on his horse, Xu Qi'an looked down at her and spoke slowly, "Just an hour ago, you and I met in a restaurant, drinking and chatting. Then, when I went downstairs to fight, you silently stole my treasure."

Before Miss Rongrong could respond, Young Master Liu, furious, spoke up, "That's impossible! Miss Rongrong has been with us the whole time. She never went anywhere near you."

The other young heroes immediately backed him up.

Xu Qi'an frowned. Was this a group of con artists?

But judging by their tone and demeanor, they didn't seem to be lying. With his expertise in microexpressions and psychology, Xu Qi'an was confident in his ability to tell if someone was lying.

Unless they were all Oscar-worthy actors... If only the Confucian spellbook wasn't in that fragment of the Earth Book, I could have just used the Qi-watching technique to see if they were lying... Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment, then said:

"You'll all come back to the Nightwatchers' headquarters with me. Whether you're lying or not, I'll be the judge of that."

No way!

The young heroes' faces changed. They began to doubt Xu Qi'an's true intentions. As members of prominent sects, they had enough experience to know that when it came to trickery, those with official backing were often the most devious and ruthless.

They used their power to commit all kinds of crimes, effortlessly oppressing others.

Miss Rongrong, with her beauty, had gained some fame in the capital. Who knew if this young Silver Gong was lusting after her, using the excuse of a stolen treasure to take them to the headquarters for some other nefarious reason?

Entering someone else's territory, life and death are decided with just a word.

"Do you really think we're fish on a chopping block?" Young Master Liu squinted his eyes, sneering coldly.

The rest of the young swordsmen didn't speak but simultaneously placed their hands on the hilts of their swords and blades.

Although those from the martial world feared the constabulary, they were equally proud and untamable. If truly pushed to the edge, they would fight even officials to the death. Worst-case scenario, they'd become outlaws and wander the martial world as fugitives.

After all, they said martial artists broke the law by force.

At this moment, a bystander, perhaps incentivised by the silver coin, cautiously reminded them, "That man is the very Silver Gong who slashed and severely injured his opponent with just one strike earlier on the arena."

The young swordsmen froze, their expressions stiffening. They turned back mechanically to glance at the bystander.

Then, slowly, they twisted their necks again, staring at Xu Qi'an.

The previously tense atmosphere suddenly dissipated, and the resolve for a desperate fight drained from them.

Miss Rongrong, took a deep breath and said reluctantly, "Sir, since I stole your treasure, I will go with you back to the constabulary. This has nothing to do with the others."

"No!" her companions protested anxiously.

Rongrong smiled bitterly and transmitted her voice to them, "You should focus on contacting our elders, so they can find a way to rescue me."

Young Master Liu's face darkened as he nodded gravely.

If you truly did steal my treasure, not even the gods can save you... Xu Qi'an watched as Rongrong finished speaking telepathically, then patted his horse, saying, "Get up here."

Rongrong hesitated for a moment, biting her crimson lips, then leaped onto the horse's back.

Seizing the moment, Xu Qi'an gently poked her soft waist. The beauty let out a soft "hmm," her body going limp as she collapsed into his arms.

"Hyah!"

Xu Qi'an pulled the reins, turned the horse around, and rode off, leaving behind a group of young heroes too furious to act.

Lying against Xu Qi'an's broad, firm chest as the scenery sped by, Rongrong gritted her teeth and whispered, "How does Sir plan to deal with me?"

"According to the laws of Great Feng, thieves are punished with fifty lashes and must return the stolen goods. Those unable to repay will have a toe severed. As I am a Viscount and the stolen item is a treasure, your crime is multiplied threefold—one hundred fifty lashes, toe severing, and three years of imprisonment."

Rongrong's face paled. "Is this really the punishment for thievery in the capital?"

This wasn't what she had heard.

"No, I made that up just now."

"....."

Xu Qi'an could feel the beauty in his arms relax slightly, as though relieved, but he sneered and added, "But once you're in the Nightwatcher's constabulary, how you're punished is entirely up to me."

Her body tensed up again, and she said tearfully, "I swear, I didn't steal your treasure!"

Xu Qi'an chuckled. "Let's see what makes the famous Soul-stealing Hand so special."

Rongrong didn't respond.

Xu Qi'an made a stern noise in response.

Rongrong gritted her teeth. "So you do lust after my beauty after all."

"?"

Xu Qi'an had simply wanted to understand how she managed to steal the Earth Book Fragment without him sensing it.

"Though Miss Rongrong may be naturally beautiful, don't underestimate men. If we're talking about looks, I have two women at home far more beautiful than you."

As he spoke, his hands roamed over her body in search of the stolen item.

Rongrong's face flushed red, her eyes welled with tears. She had an idea of the fate that awaited her and could only hope her companions would inform their elders in time to save her.

Huh, the Earth Book Fragment isn't on her...

Xu Qi'an's mare was a warhorse-grade steed, and she galloped swiftly, carrying both of them at high speed towards the constabulary.

Arriving at the gates, Xu Qi'an handed the reins to a guard and dragged Rongrong inside, heading straight for Silver Gong Min Shan's hall. He ordered the officers to bind her tightly.

"Go to Sitianjian and call for a white-robed arcanist, tell them it's under my orders."

"Yes."

After the constable left, Min Shan stood up, circling Rongrong and inspecting her. "Where did you find this beauty? Look at her figure and that face... tsk tsk."

"Sell her to the Jiaofangsi, train her for a year or so, and she could become an Oiran," Xu Qi'an commented.

"An Oiran isn't just about looks," Min Shan shook his head. "Talent comes first, beauty second."

"Never mind then, we can keep her here for our brothers to enjoy."

Rongrong forced herself to remain calm, though her face had already turned pale.

After exchanging some banter, Xu Qi'an explained the situation. "This woman stole my treasure. As expected from the Soul-stealing Hand, she managed to do it without me even noticing."

"She's the Soul-stealing Hand?" Min Shan finally realised, then wondered, "What does the Soul-stealing Hand have to do with theft?"

"Hmm?" Xu Qi'an was puzzled.

"Every martial artist entering the capital is documented. Soul-stealing Hand Rongrong hails from the Wanhua Tower in Qinghai County, Yuzhou. That's a sect of women notorious for using seduction to ruin men. It's tied to their cultivation methods."

"Dual cultivation?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"No, they say it involves manipulating a person's lust, making them lose their will to fight. Their supreme technique is supposedly called..." Min Shan couldn't quite recall.

"The Grand [Censored] Art of the Six Desires," Rongrong said, lifting her chin slightly.

"Then how did you steal my treasure?"

"I didn't steal your treasure."

Not long after, the constable returned with a white-robed arcanist in tow.

Xu Qi'an pointed to Rongrong. "Ask her if she stole from me."

The arcanist's eyes glowed with mystical light. After questioning her, he shook his head. "Sir Xu, she didn't lie."

..... Xu Qi'an was dumbfounded.

"Search her, see if there's any technique concealing her aura."

"Nothing, Sir Xu."

"Ask her if we drank together at the tavern."

"Nothing, Sir Xu."

Xu Qi'an felt completely baffled. Had he seen a ghost?

After his initial frustration, he began analysing the situation calmly. The one who stole from him was definitely Rongrong. It couldn't have been that older woman... The biggest issue here was that there seemed to be two Rongrongs.

The one before him had never met him, yet he had clearly encountered her.

Her hairstyle, clothing, and appearance were identical, even her demeanour and mannerisms... could it be a twin? Impossible, twins wouldn't be exactly the same.

Was it a disguise? But if it was, it wouldn't fool his sharp eye.

As he puzzled over it, Rongrong suddenly spoke, "I know, I know who it was."

Chapter 276. Bail

Xu Qi'an sat comfortably in the large chair, sipping his tea slowly. "Go ahead, explain," he said calmly.

Miss Rongrong pursed her red lips and said, "Since Sir Xu has heard of my reputation, you must also be familiar with the Thousand-faced Thief, right?"

"I've heard of her," Xu Qi'an stroked his chin, eyeing her. "So, you're saying the one who stole my treasure was actually that Thousand-faced Thief?"

"Silver Gong Min, could you fetch me the file on that woman," Xu ordered.

Min Shan immediately instructed a clerk to retrieve the file. After a cup of tea's time, the clerk returned with a booklet, opened to the relevant page, and handed it to Xu Qi'an.

The file on the Thousand-faced Thief was brief. It only noted that she was an exceptionally skilled thief, always working alone, with no known master or background, having committed countless crimes without ever being caught.

From this entry, Xu Qi'an gleaned two pieces of information: first, that the thief was no ordinary criminal, capable of pulling off major heists without failure. Second, her domain was limited to theft; she lacked destructive power, which was why the Nightwatchers had only recorded a few lines about her, not considering her a serious threat.

"Quite a specialist," Xu Qi'an closed the booklet and handed it back to the clerk, then turned to the tightly bound Miss Rongrong. "Why did the Thousand-faced Thief disguise herself as you?"

Miss Rongrong sneered, "Who knows? Maybe she's jealous of how charming I am."

...Seems like they've had some bad blood before, and now it's payback. Xu Qi'an picked up his sabre and hooked it back onto his belt. "Min, she's your responsibility now. No one releases her without my permission, no matter who it is."

After some final instructions, Xu Qi'an hurried out of the constabulary, mounted his beloved mare, and rode towards the outer city.

The only option was to seek Daoist Jinlian's personal intervention. Fortunately, Xu knew where Jinlian lived, though he had never visited.

As the sun gradually dipped lower, curfew loomed an hour away. Xu needed to find the female thief and retrieve the earth book fragment before curfew, or else he'd have no choice but to return to the constabulary and ask Wei Yuan to issue a search warrant.

Daoist Jinlian resided in a small courtyard by the river in the northern city. The telltale sign was the tiny straw doll perched atop the roof of the main house.

Xu Qi'an arrived and knocked on the courtyard gate. Silence. No one responded.

Is the Daoist out?

Xu Qi'an vaulted over the wall, entered the courtyard, and pushed open the door of the main house. The interior was clean and orderly. On the bed lay Daoist Jinlian, his face peaceful as though he had passed away.

Xu Qi'an called out "Daoist" a few times. Seeing that Jinlian remained unresponsive, he realised the old man must have slipped into his cat form again.

Why has he suddenly developed this strange habit...? What should I do now?

After pondering for a moment, Xu Qi'an had an idea.

He casually walked to the bed, raised his hands, and began slapping the Daoist's face back and forth with a crisp "smack smack smack."

As a seasoned veteran of the martial world, Daoist Jinlian surely had measures in place to protect his body. If his physical form suffered harm, he would immediately sense it and...

"Smack smack smack!"

The sound of slaps filled the room.

After some time, a calm, emotionless voice came from the doorway. "What are you doing?"

The slapping stopped instantly. Xu Qi'an turned around with delight. "Daoist, you're back!"

At the threshold stood an orange tabby cat, staring at him coldly.

Seeing the Daoist remain silent, Xu hurriedly explained, "I have an urgent matter to discuss with you, but you weren't in. I figured you must have left some safeguard on your body, so I had no choice but to wake you this way."

The tabby cat's voice remained flat. "Did you ever consider that I sensed your presence the moment you entered the courtyard?"

So, Daoist Jinlian sensed my arrival as soon as I entered the courtyard... Xu Qi'an blinked. "I had no idea."

The orange cat nodded, gracefully trotting into the room and leaping onto the bed. "What do you need?"

"My earth book fragment was stolen."

Xu Qi'an quickly recounted how he had been duped by the Thousand-faced Thief and mistakenly captured Miss Rongrong.

"The earth book fragments, once bonded to their owner, cannot be seen or accessed by others. You need not worry," the orange cat said calmly.

"Then, when I obtained it from you, it was a neutral object?"

"The imprint had been erased by the Daoist of the Earth Sect."

Xu Qi'an nodded, already aware of this. "Time is of the essence; we must retrieve the fragment."

"Follow me."

The orange tabby hopped off the bed and dashed out of the house. Xu Qi'an followed, noticing the cat sitting on his mare's back, its head tilted as if waiting for him.

Why isn't the Daoist using his human form? Even if he enjoys being a cat, this is serious business... Could it be that to him, it makes no difference whether he uses his physical body or his spirit?

With lingering doubts, Xu untied the reins, patted his mare's face, and mentally apologised for making her carry someone else.

Clip-clop, clip-clop...

The mare galloped through the spacious streets. Pedestrians quickly moved aside—no one in their right mind would block his path.

This was an era where people made way for vehicles.

"Turn left!" the orange cat suddenly commanded.

Xu Qi'an steered the mare into a sharp drift, smoothly turning left.

Following the Daoist's directions, Xu Qi'an rode from the northern city to the eastern city, stopping outside an inn.

"The earth book fragment is inside," said the orange cat.

As he spoke, Xu Qi'an felt a faint connection with the fragment, a subtle, almost mystical sensation of closeness, confirming the fragment's location.

The earth book fragment would resonate with its host at close range.

...

Inside a room in the inn, a woman with heavy makeup, large almond-shaped eyes, and a seductive gaze sat at a table. One hand propped up her chin while the other played with a small jade mirror.

"Why can't I use this treasure?"

The impostor Rongrong scrutinised the earth book fragment. Though it appeared unremarkable at first glance, her keen instincts as the only heir to the Thieves Guild told her otherwise.

Finding treasures was a natural skill for disciples of the Thieves Guild.

The fragment's surface was etched with strange patterns—a chest, silver banknotes, a military crossbow, silver ingots... Drawing on her years of "treasure hunting" experience, she quickly deduced its nature:

This was a blood-bonded magical artefact with storage capabilities.

Immediately, her heart surged with excitement. She had hit the jackpot, not only acquiring a magical item but also discovering a fortune inside.

"How do I get the items out...?"

The fake Rongrong knocked the fragment on the table, thinking.

For blood-bound magical items, she knew the basic rule: if you destroyed the item, everything stored inside would be released. However, this particular item was clearly of extraordinary value—destroying it to access its contents would be like killing the goose that laid golden eggs.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

The fake Rongrong frowned. She hadn't called for hot water, and her room fees were paid up.

"We've come to read your water meter," came a man's voice from outside.^[^1]

Upon hearing the voice, the expression of "Rongrong" changed drastically. Without thinking, she grabbed the jade mirror, stuffed it into her pocket, and rushed toward the window.

"Bang!"

She opened the window, preparing to escape, only to find an orange cat sitting by the window, its amber eyes quietly watching her.

"Rongrong" felt as though her brain had been pierced by steel nails, ripping through her soul. She clutched her head and groaned, slumping to the floor.

The door opened, and Xu Qi'an, one hand resting on his sword, strode in with an air of indifference.

The orange cat leaped from the windowsill into the room.

“It’s you after all!” Xu Qi’an drew his black-gold sword and rested it against “Rongrong’s” neck, sneering, “The Thousand-Faced Thief.”

“Sir, what are you talking about?” “Rongrong’s” lively eyes darted about, seemingly searching for a way out.

Xu Qi’an extended his hand and lightly grasped the air. The fragment of the Earth Book flew out from “Rongrong’s” pocket and landed automatically in his hand.

“Rongrong” let out a startled “Ah!” and reached out in an attempt to grab it back, but a sharp pain in her neck forced her to give up the idea.

This man was powerful. Even ten of her wouldn’t be able to withstand a single strike from him.

After inspecting the Earth Book fragment and confirming that nothing was missing from it, Xu Qi’an let out a sigh of relief, as though a weight had been lifted off his chest.

The treasures within the fragment, including the silver notes and hard metals, were his entire savings. After six months of hardship in this world, it had taken him great effort to amass this wealth.

It was, after all, his dowry fund.

He tucked the Earth Book fragment back into his chest, sheathed his sword, pulled up a chair, and sat down with a playful grin as he eyed the now defeated female thief.

“Huh, aren’t you going to try denying it?”

“Caught red-handed, what’s there to deny?” The thief rolled her eyes, muttering, “I’ve roamed the Nine Provinces for years and never thought I’d fall in the capital. They say it’s the greatest city under heaven, so I suppose I can’t complain...”

Her tone and demeanour had shifted dramatically from the coquettish act she had put on in the restaurant. Now, her real persona, a seasoned rogue, had emerged.

At the restaurant, she had been playing a role. This was her true nature.

Xu Qi’an, like a cat toying with a mouse, teased, “Come on, try to talk your way out of it. Maybe if you make me laugh, I’ll let you go.”

The thief’s expression changed in an instant, becoming pitiful and tearful. “I’m just a poor woman. I was sold to a brothel at the age of three, forced to serve customers by the time I was ten, and at fifteen, I was taken in by my master. I thought my suffering had finally ended, but then, on a dark and stormy night, he... he...”

Her acting was so convincing that Xu Qi’an wasn’t sure whether to believe her or not.

“Alright, alright, I sympathise with your story, but the law is the law. I’ve got a few questions for you. Answer them honestly,” Xu Qi’an said. “How did you manage to steal my treasure without me noticing?”

“That’s my specialty. Below the fourth rank, I can steal from anyone, however I please.”

“And how did you disguise yourself?” Xu Qi'an leaned closer, pinching her chin as he scrutinised her face. “This isn't a human skin mask, but this face clearly isn't yours.”

“This is a unique technique from my Thieves' Guild called the 'Veil of Heaven.' It's not just a disguise; it actually alters one's appearance, far superior to ordinary techniques.”

“Wait!”

Daoist Jinlian suddenly interrupted, his amber eyes fixed on the thief. “What did you just say? What school are you from?”

Sensing the deadly aura, the thief weakly replied, “The Thieves' Guild...”

Daoist Jinlian turned to Xu Qi'an, his voice cold, “Might as well just kill her.”

This was likely the most humiliating moment for the Daoist sect... Xu Qi'an, barely able to suppress a smirk, replied solemnly, “Do you have any idea who this is in front of you?”

The thief shook her head.

“He's a high-ranking member of the Daoist Earth Sect.”

“From now on, we'll change our name to the Divine Hand Sect.” Her survival instincts were strong.

Changing the name of a sect just like that? Xu Qi'an was momentarily stunned, but seeing that Daoist Jinlian had no further comment, he returned to his questioning. “Hand over the secret manual.”

With a resigned look, the thief said, “It's not something you can learn from a manual. It's a skill taught personally by the master from a young age. I started training when I was four and only mastered it after over a decade.”

“Didn't you just say you were sold to a brothel at three, served customers at ten, and became your master's personal little girl at fifteen?”

“...Perhaps Sir Xu misheard?”

Xu Qi'an realised then that you couldn't believe a single word out of a rogue's mouth.

“Hand over the disguise manual.”

The thief nodded in defeat, “It's in the wardrobe. I'll go get it.”

Seeing Xu Qi'an nod in agreement, she walked over to the wardrobe and took out a bundle. “The manual is inside.”

Xu Qi'an opened the bundle, but the moment he did, a green mist erupted from it. Caught off guard, both he and Daoist Jinlian inhaled a few breaths of the mist, and instantly fell unconscious.

Having held her breath in advance, the female thief pulled out an antidote from the bundle, took it, and then inhaled deeply before smirking triumphantly. “You dare go up against me? You're still far too green.”

She then kicked Xu Qi'an a few times out of spite and rummaged through his robes to retrieve the jade mirror.

Suddenly, she felt something hard pressing against her lower back. Xu Qi'an's voice came from behind her: "Looks like I'll have to kill you after all."

The "Rongrong" impostor looked down in shock to find that the Silver Gong lying on the ground had vanished.

She dared not move, realising that what was pressed against her back was a sword.

"I told you, this is a high-ranking Daoist of the Earth Sect. You didn't even realise you'd fallen under an illusion," Xu Qi'an chuckled. "Nice ass though."

The thief had completely given up at this point.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Ge Xiaojing."

.....

Xu Qi'an sealed the female thief Ge Xiaojing's acupoints, tied her up tightly, and threw her onto his horse. He bid farewell to Daoist Jinlian.

The orange cat nodded slightly and advised, "Be careful on the road."

With that, it walked away elegantly.

Xu Qi'an loosened the reins, about to mount his beloved little mare, when suddenly the horse went wild. It spun around, lifted its head, and delivered a swift kick, sending Xu Qi'an flying through the air.

With a neigh, the horse galloped off into the distance.

"???"

Xu Qi'an, covered in dirt, chased after it, managing to stop the horse just before it collided with pedestrians. After calming it down for a long while, the mare finally became docile again.

"Little mare, don't you love me anymore? Ever since that old Daoist Jinlian rode you, you've been neglecting me."

Xu Qi'an sat on the horse, thinking to himself that he wouldn't try to play tricks anymore—after all, ginger gets spicier as it ages.

...

Back at the Nightwatcher Constabulary, Xu Qi'an threw the female thief into the dungeon, warning the guards not to lay a hand on her, as she still had use to him.

By now, the curfew had been in effect for two hours, and the sky was dark. However, for a Silver Gong, curfew meant little.

"I can release the Soul-Stealing Hand Rongrong, but it's already curfew. She can't leave the inner city. I'll deal with her tomorrow..."

The next day, Xu Qi'an rode back to the Constabulary, where a clerk was waiting for him at the entrance. Upon seeing him, the clerk jogged over and said, "Sir Xu, a group of Jianghu people has come to the Constabulary to bail someone. They're asking about the girl you brought in yesterday. She's with Silver Gong Min now."

Only now they come to bail her out? If I were one of those lecherous people, I could have filled the child's bedroom several times over by now... Xu Qi'an clicked his tongue and said, "I see."

Chapter 277. Zhong Li the Worker

Young Master Liu and his companions were not having an easy time. After Miss Rongrong was taken away, the young heroes, led by Young Master Liu, quickly returned to the inn to inform the elders about what had transpired.

After a brief discussion, the elders decided not to rush to the Nightwatchers Constabulary to demand her release. Instead, they used their connections and tried to handle the matter through official channels.

Upon learning that it was the Nightwatchers who had taken her, those "connections" in the capital, who held no insignificant positions, showed hesitation. Yet, after being begged with heavy bribes, they reluctantly agreed to help.

However, as soon as they heard the name of the Nightwatcher who had arrested her—Xu Qi'an—their faces turned pale. They waved their hands repeatedly, exclaiming: "Impossible! Can't be done!"

Thus, the whole afternoon was wasted. By the next morning, they had no choice but to brace themselves and visit the Constabulary, hoping that this infamous Silver Gong might show some mercy.

Miss Rongrong's teacher was a charming middle-aged woman, with a round and graceful face that hinted at the beauty she must have been in her youth. Her heart was full of worry, knowing all too well the nature of men. After a whole night, who knew what sort of torture Rongrong might have endured...

Losing her chastity was one thing. Worse would be if she had fallen into the hands of a greedy man who would lock her up in a grand mansion as his plaything. That would be a woman's true tragedy.

Young Master Liu's master, on the other hand, was a composed middle-aged swordsman, distinguished by his deep nasolabial lines and bright, piercing eyes.

The two elders exchanged glances, seeing the same worry and helplessness in each other's gaze.

Even the most arrogant martial artist would keep their temper in check and their claws sheathed within the expert-filled Constabulary.

They waited anxiously for the length of two incense sticks until a young man in a Silver Gong uniform, with a special sword hanging from his waist, stepped into the room and entered the side hall.

"Who here is the teacher of Miss Rongrong?" Xu Qi'an scanned the room before speaking.

The middle-aged woman rose and bowed. "It is this old woman."

No need to be so modest, Auntie...with a figure and face like yours, how could you call yourself old? Xu Qi'an nodded and said, "I've investigated the matter. It wasn't Miss Rongrong who stole my artifact but the Thousand Faces Thief, Ge Xiaojing.

"The culprit has been apprehended. You may take Miss Rongrong with you."

Hearing this, the two elders sighed in relief. The young heroes who had come along were also overjoyed.

However, unlike their more innocent younger counterparts, the elders harboured no illusions. Rongrong was likely...

But for Xu Qi'an to release her after a night of indulgence was already better than they had hoped. They would just have to accept their misfortune.

"Thank you, Sir!" the middle-aged woman said gratefully.

At that moment, Miss Rongrong, led by one of the clerks, entered the side hall.

Her emotions were calm. She cheerfully called out, "Master!" without any sign of breaking down in tears or throwing a tantrum.

The middle-aged woman took this in without showing emotion, only saying, "It's all right now. This gentleman here is perceptive and has not wronged you."

Miss Rongrong curtsied gracefully and sweetly said, "Thank you, Sir Xu."

The middle-aged swordsman cleared his throat and clasped his fists, "Then, we shall not linger any longer."

He let a stack of silver notes slide from his sleeve and on to the table.

"Take the notes with you," Xu Qi'an said lightly.

He didn't feel right accepting them. After all, Miss Rongrong hadn't caused trouble, nor had she stolen anything. The whole affair was merely a misunderstanding.

The middle-aged swordsman, surprised, scrutinised Xu Qi'an with disbelief. Finally, he cupped his fists again, "Many thanks, Sir."

The group of jianghu guests then prepared to leave. But just as they were about to cross the threshold, Xu Qi'an's voice called out from behind, "Hold on!"

The middle-aged swordsman paused, a hint of disdain crossing his face along with a wave of relief. It was only natural for officers to be unable to resist money.

Turning back, he reached into his sleeve for the silver notes, ready to offer them once again. But what he saw was Xu Qi'an unfurling a piece of rice paper and dipping his brush into the ink to write something.

Once he had finished writing, Xu Qi'an pressed his thumb into the ink and left a fingerprint.

Everyone was puzzled, unsure of what he intended.

"This official does not like owing other people." Xu Qi'an said. "Yesterday, I broke this young man's magic weapon. Take this note to the Sitianjian and find Song Qing. He'll give you a replacement weapon on my behalf." Xu Qi'an flicked the paper toward the middle-aged swordsman.

The man caught it, thanked Xu Qi'an, and left.

As the group walked out of the Nightwatchers' Constabulary, the beautiful woman held Miss Rongrong's hand without saying a word. Finally, one of the young heroes spoke up, his tone a little worried, "Rongrong, did he... Did he bully you last night?"

The young heroes froze for a moment, then stared at her expectantly.

The middle-aged swordsman barked, "Stop spouting nonsense!"

Although he and the woman had long assumed Rongrong's chastity had been compromised, they had purposely avoided mentioning it. After all, honour was as important to those in the jianghu as to anyone else.

"He didn't do anything to me. I spent the night alone in a room at the Nightwatchers' constabulary," Rongrong shook her head, explaining, "Though the bedding smelled a bit musty."

After a night had passed, her fear and anxiety had dissipated. She now understood that the Silver Gong was a man of honour.

Since the topic had been broached, the beautiful woman no longer held back her curiosity and asked, "If he didn't bully you, then why did he arrest you?"

"Well, the item belonging to Sir Xu really was stolen, but the thief was Ge Xiaojing. The reason he arrested me was that Ge Xiaojing disguised herself as me when she committed the theft, which led to the misunderstanding," Rongrong explained.

That made sense...

The beautiful woman frowned. "And why did Ge Xiaojing disguise herself as you?"

Rongrong angrily explained, "The day before yesterday, while drinking with Young Master Liu and the others at the restaurant, I mentioned her by name, saying that the Thousand Faces Thief was a petty criminal, only fit for sneak thievery. How could she possibly be compared to me?"

"I suspect that my words reached her ears, and she decided to get back at me by stealing in my guise."

"That sounds about right," Young Master Liu and the others nodded.

Now the story made sense. The Silver Gong was also a victim; arresting Rongrong was just a misunderstanding. He wasn't abusing his authority or being lecherous.

The young knights breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The middle-aged swordsman nodded. "Earlier, I offered him silver notes, but he refused. It's good to see that the young man still holds onto his righteousness."

His tone was full of approval.

Young Master Liu pondered for a moment before asking, "Master... What about the matter of the magic weapon?"

The middle-aged swordsman glanced at his disciple and chuckled, "In the capital, the Sitianjian outranks even the Nightwatchers. Though the Silver Gong has a respectable position, to think he

could simply present a note and receive a replacement weapon from the Sitianjian—such a thing is preposterous."

Young Master Liu couldn't hide his disappointment, "Then why did he..."

"Young men are always concerned about saving face," the middle-aged swordsman laughed. "There's no need for us to take it seriously."

The beautiful woman's eyes glimmered, and she suggested, "Well, since we have some time on our hands, why don't we pay a visit to the Sitianjian anyway? We can show the children the tallest building in all of Great Feng."

"Sure, why not."

...

Xu Qi'an held an ancient, yellowed book in his hand as he emerged from the dungeon, having just finished interrogating Ge Xiaojing, the infamous female thief. He had asked her about the secrets of the "Veil of Heaven" technique.

"This thief is quite talented. I'll keep her around; she'll be useful in the future. Ha, stealing my treasure? I'll squeeze every bit of value out of you, and later, I'll drive you like an ox or a horse. Of course, I'll let you graze in the meantime."

Since the Spring Breeze Hall was still under construction, and his office was also being built, he was currently a Silver Gong without an office, forcing him to once again head over to Min Shan's Gold Jade Hall to borrow a bit of his space.

Upon entering the side hall, he ordered the clerks to bring hot tea and began to read the yellowed book with great interest.

The art of disguise in the Thieves' Guild—no, the Divine Hand Sect—was indeed mysterious. Unlike ordinary disguise techniques, it didn't involve making a lifelike human skin mask. Instead, it directly altered one's appearance. The method involved applying a special potion to the face for the duration of half an incense stick, causing the flesh to heat up and "melt." Then, using a unique qi technique, one's facial features could be reshaped.

The effect lasted for twenty-four hours, though it could also be undone voluntarily.

For a warrior in the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage, the potion's dosage needed to be tripled, and the soaking time extended by an additional quarter of an hour. After all, their skin was exceptionally thick.

The hardest part of this secret technique is careful observation and repeated practice. It's like painting—beginners start by copying, while advanced artists can freely create, perfectly capturing someone's likeness after just a glance.

It's a craft that requires diligent effort. The person I'm most familiar with is Second Uncle and Erlang. Since Second Uncle is an elder, I'll start with Erlang.

At that moment, a clerk entered, bowing respectfully. "Sir Xu, Duke Wei requests your presence."

...

On the seventh floor, inside the tearoom.

Wei Yuan stood by his desk, holding a brush in hand. His eyes were focused, and he was deeply immersed in his painting.

Without looking up, Wei Yuan continued his strokes and asked, "Have you offended anyone recently?"

Xu Qi'an joked, "Following you, it's impossible not to offend people. I can't even count the enemies I've made."

Wei Yuan gave a nonchalant "hmm" and said, "With that awareness, your future achievements will know no bounds."

After a pause, he added, "The sixth-rank you brought back yesterday was taken away early this morning. Think carefully again—have you offended anyone?"

Xu Qi'an sighed in frustration. "I can't remember, which is why I brought him back. Why did you release him?"

He was complaining about Wei Yuan.

In the Nightwatchers Constabulary, only two people dared speak to Wei Yuan in such a manner—one was Xu Qi'an, and the other was the Vinegar Jar.

Wei Yuan remained silent, slowly sketching on the paper. Finally, he set down the brush and exhaled deeply. "The painting is done."

"What did you paint, Duke Wei?" Xu Qi'an eagerly leaned in.

The painting depicted a beautiful woman in palace attire, wearing a luxurious dress adorned with numerous ornaments. She held a delicate silk fan in her slender hand.

Her beauty was indescribable, not in her facial features but in her aura.

Seeing that it wasn't the empress, Xu Qi'an grew bold and asked, "This lady is so beautiful. Is she betrothed to anyone? Do you know her, Duke Wei? Your humble subordinate is still unmarried."

Wei Yuan shook his head with regret. "No one in this world can truly capture her beauty, not even I."

In the end, he didn't reveal who the woman in the painting was, nor did he mention the matter of offending others again. Instead, he waved Xu Qi'an out of the Tower of Noble Spirit.

...

At the base of the Stargazing Tower, the group led by the Soul-Stealing Hand Rongrong was once again awed by the towering structure. This was the first time they stood so close to the tallest building in all of the Great Feng.

Previously, they had observed it from a distance, noting how it soared into the clouds, seemingly piercing the heavens. But seeing it up close, they truly understood its majestic grandeur. The foundation alone, rising above the ground, was as tall as a two-storey building.

Each stone block forming the foundation was larger than a carriage.

Standing before this towering structure, they were keenly aware of their own insignificance.

"Master, shall we enter?" Young Master Liu quietly swallowed, his throat dry from nervousness.

"Enter?"

The middle-aged swordsman glanced at his disciple, then shook his head. "I'll go in alone. You all wait outside. Entering the Sitianjian is no easier than stepping into the imperial palace."

Given that they were coming with a "let's see what happens" attitude, if anything went wrong, it would be better for him to bear the embarrassment alone. After all, if he faced disgrace by himself, it didn't count. But if his juniors witnessed it, that would be true humiliation.

The middle-aged swordsman straightened his robes, puffed out his chest, and began ascending the long marble steps.

"Senior Hua..." Young Master Liu asked the woman beside him, "Do you think my master can acquire a new magical artefact?"

He was still unwilling to give up hope. The Seven Star Sword, which ranked highly even within the Ink Pavilion, had been destroyed. When he returned to his sect, he would surely be punished.

More importantly, there was no way he could obtain another magical artefact.

The Sitianjian was renowned across the land. Every martial artist dreamed of obtaining an artefact crafted by the Sitianjian.

The longing was so great that even knowing the odds were slim, they still indulged in such daydreams.

"Do you know why your master said the note was just the young man's attempt to save face and told you not to get your hopes up?" the woman asked, turning to the group of juniors.

Young Master Liu and the others shook their heads.

"Because Song Qing, whom your master seeks, is the Jianzheng's direct disciple. His status in the Great Feng Jianghu is comparable to that of the emperor's sons. Do you understand now?"

They understood. It became clear that the young Silver Gong's note was indeed just a superficial gesture. How could someone with the status of a martial prince be swayed by a mere note?

Meanwhile, the middle-aged swordsman ascended the marble steps and entered the first floor, where the ninth-grade physicians gathered.

A strong herbal scent filled the air. White-robed arcanists were busy with various tasks—some were brewing potions, others copying herb diagrams, while others sorted and categorised materials.

"Who are you?" A white-robed arcanist approached.

The middle-aged swordsman quickly lowered his head, cupped his hands, and respectfully said, "I am Yang Yuzhuo of the Ink Pavilion in Jianzhou."

Jianzhou's Ink Pavilion? Never heard of it... The arcanist waved his hand dismissively. "Just state your business."

"I seek an audience with Master Song Qing. This note was given to me by a Silver Gong from the Nightwatchers Constabulary named Xu." The middle-aged swordsman humbly presented the note.

If Young Master Liu had seen his master at this moment, his feelings would have been conflicted. The same master who often harshly rebuked his disciples now appeared obsequious in front of a mere physician with little cultivation.

The white-robed arcanist took the note, glanced at it, and immediately adopted a serious expression. He uttered a few words—"Wait here!"—and hurried upstairs.

The middle-aged swordsman froze for a moment, surprised by the unexpected reaction.

Wait, can this note really exchange for a magical weapon? How is that possible?

Soon enough, the white-robed arcanist returned, holding something in his hand, answering the swordsman's doubts perfectly.

It was a sword with a plain appearance, lacking any ornate tassels or gold inlays on the scabbard and hilt. It was simple and unadorned.

"Here!"

The arcanist handed it over, and as the swordsman fumbled to receive it, the arcanist turned and resumed his duties.

I should leave now... The swordsman, without inspecting the treasure, held it close and quietly exited the Sitianjian.

"Master has come out!" Young Master Liu exclaimed excitedly.

"Is that... is that really a magical weapon?" Rongrong noticed the sword held tightly by the swordsman.

Reaching his disciples, the swordsman glanced at the weapon in his arms, hesitated for a moment, and said, "Let's leave this place."

The beautiful woman nodded, her gaze never leaving the unadorned sword.

After walking for a while, distancing themselves from the towering Observation Tower, the swordsman finally stopped in a secluded spot and inspected the sword in his arms.

"Master, please, take a look..." Young Master Liu's heart raced, more excited than seeing a stunning beauty awaiting him in bed.

The swordsman grasped the hilt and slowly unsheathed the sword. A resounding *_clang_* followed, and a dazzling, snow-bright gleam flooded their eyes, forcing everyone to close them reflexively.

The sword, four feet long, bore natural cloud patterns across the blade, exuding an intense cold aura. A mere touch would cause sword energy to tear open one's finger.

"Sword energy, self-generated... it's self-generated sword energy..."

The swordsman's hands trembled with excitement, his gaze fervent. "This is a supreme magical weapon. Even our sect master's sword — the **Cold of Autumn Rain** is no match for this."

Thump-thump, thump-thump... Young Master Liu could hear his own rapid heartbeat.

Self-generating sword energy—such a sword was considered top-tier in the Jianghu.

"Master, let me have a look, please!" Young Master Liu reached out eagerly.

Smack!

The swordsman slapped his hand away. Even he was surprised by his own reaction, as if the sword were his wife, not to be desecrated by others.

"Master, why did you hit me?" Young Master Liu asked, feeling wronged.

The swordsman thought for a moment, then said earnestly, "This sword is a top-tier magical weapon. They say a man with a treasure is guilty of his possession. This is not a good thing for you.

"I've made a difficult decision. For now, I'll keep this sword safe for you and bear the risks. When your cultivation is advanced, I'll return it to you.

"It's settled. Don't say any more, your teacher's heart is made up. To compensate you, I'll give you my cherished sword that's been with me for twenty years. Take care of it—it's like my wife."

"..." Young Master Liu looked at him with a deep sense of betrayal.

If Xu Qi'an were present, he'd surely feel a connection with Young Master Liu, recalling how his parents used similar reasons to confiscate countless red envelopes and allowances during his childhood, causing a deficit exceeding ten billion.

"Who exactly is this Young Master Xu?" Rongrong muttered.

No one had an answer for her. The group fell into silence, each person likely picturing the bold, handsome Silver Gong in their minds.

The beautiful middle-aged woman admired the sword, then glanced at her alluring disciple...

Suddenly, she realised that nothing happening last night might have been her greatest loss.

...

After sending off Rongrong and the other martial artists, Xu Qi'an stayed in the side hall, practicing breathing exercises, visualisation, cultivating his heart-sword, and studying the Veil of Heaven technique. Before he knew it, it was past lunch.

It was only when his stomach growled that he realised his hunger.

Though learning more techniques benefits me greatly, I feel like there isn't enough time...

I mustn't take on any more techniques. Greed leads to inefficiency. I should focus on mastering One Blade from Heaven and Earth while supplementing it with some auxiliary skills.

I finally understand why emperors throughout history didn't pursue martial arts or cultivation. There simply isn't enough time. A day has only twelve hours, and governance takes priority. Even the most talented person would become overwhelmed.

After lunch, Zhong Li arrived.

This disciple of the Jianzheng, Chu Caiwei's senior sister, was dressed in a coarse long robe, with her dishevelled hair hiding her face, head slightly lowered.

"I'm so glad you're unharmed." Xu Qi'an patted her on the shoulder.

"Thank you for your concern." Zhong Li replied politely.

Judging by her voice, she was likely between 20 and 25 years old. Girls under 20 had crisp, sweet voices, while those over 20 began to develop a sensual tone, characteristic of a woman's mature charm.

"Did you face any danger yesterday?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"I encountered thirty-six crises in total: twenty minor, ten major, and six life-threatening. But I managed to survive all of them." Zhong Li recounted, her tone suggesting familiarity with the situation.

This... the casual way she spoke about it made Xu Qi'an feel unexpectedly sympathetic. He patted her shoulder again.

"You've had a hard time. Oh uh, how's your calligraphy by the way?"

"It's passable."

"Great, Senior Sister Zhong. I need a favour from you." Xu Qi'an smiled mischievously.

Chapter 278. Reveal the List

Generally, as long as Xu Qi'an did not make requests such as "Sleep with me tonight" or "Give me a son", Zhong Li would always try to fulfil it.

Of course, if the Jianzheng were to say: "Zhong Li, if you dual cultivate with this boy, you'll definitely overcome the tribulation," then, as long as Xu Qi'an's requested positions weren't too difficult, Zhong Li could still fulfil his wishes.

But Xu Qi'an wasn't the type of person to take advantage of someone in a vulnerable situation. If Zhong Li were to propose dual cultivation, he would certainly refuse, especially since she was Chu Caiwei's senior sister.

Zhong Li obediently sat by the desk. Following Xu Qi'an's instructions, she spread out the paper specifically for book drafts, ground the ink, picked up the brush, and said, "Go ahead."

"Don't rush, I need to gather my thoughts..." Xu Qi'an sat to the side, holding a steaming cup of tea, feigning deep thought.

To prevent further conflict between Lin'an and Huaiqing, Xu Qi'an, stuck in the middle as a man caught between three families, pondered for a long time and finally came up with a plan.

Since Lin'an loves stories, Xu Qi'an would tell her one.

There were plenty of love stories circulating among the common folk, even involving tales of young Liu Bei, which could satisfy Lin'an's tastes. But Xu Qi'an, being a seasoned player, felt that he should seize every opportunity to make sure his "fish" couldn't swim away.

"The title of the book will be _Great Sage of Love_."

Seeing that she hadn't started writing, he added, "Senior Sister Zhong? Is your hair too long to see properly? Should I help you brush it aside?"

Zhong Li slowly shook her head. "That's a strange title."

Most stories and novels of the time used titles with words like "Records," "Chronicles," or "Annals," similar to the naming conventions of lyric forms, following well-established standards.

"Don't worry about it. Just write as I say." Xu Qi'an waved his hand and began to narrate his story.

Great Sage of Love told a love story that took place in the heavens. The heroine was the daughter of the Heavenly Emperor, named the Zixia Celestial. The male lead was a guard in the heavenly court, but he belonged to the demon *yao* race.

His name was Long Aotian.

In the heavenly court, yao were the lowest of the low, despised by the immortals, and could only serve as labourers and guards. His hobbies included singing, dancing, and rapping.

"There's a problem here..."

Zhong Li interjected, "The name Long Aotian seems inappropriate. Given the heavenly court's emphasis on hierarchy, such a name doesn't fit."

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment and then said, "We don't need to worry about these details."

The story continued:

Despite the vast gap in status, these two unlikely individuals fell in love. One was like a celestial flower, and the other, flawless jade.

"Wait," Zhong Li paused her writing, frowning, "The celestial flower refers to the Zixia Celestial, right? So the flawless jade would be Long Aotian... but he's a lowly demon. His background doesn't match the phrase 'flawless jade.' I think this needs to be revised."

You're such a nitpicker... Xu Qi'an was furious, his mouth twitching. "Are you trying to teach me how to write?"

Sensing his rising frustration, Zhong Li wisely stopped arguing.

The story resumed:

The two would meet secretly in the heavenly palace, from holding hands and watching the sunset clouds, to hugging and kissing, and finally, rolling around in a secluded chamber. Xu Qi'an described the progression in detail, from beginning to end, without sparing any specifics.

In this era, certain banned books had similarly detailed descriptions, often paired with poetry. While Xu Qi'an could copy poetry, writing it himself was impossible, so he didn't attempt to show off.

However, the romance between the Zixia Celestial and Long Aotian was soon discovered by a lecherous divine official who coveted the Zixia Celestial's beauty. He reported them to the Heavenly Emperor.

Furious, the Heavenly Emperor had Long Aotian skinned and his bones removed, banishing him to reincarnate as a dumb beast for eternity. The Zixia Celestial was also imprisoned in the Moon Palace for all eternity, condemned to a life of cold isolation.

The story ended there.

"How many words?" Xu Qi'an asked as he sipped his tea, moistening his throat.

Zhong Li quickly calculated. "Around 80,000 words."

Zhong Li wrote quickly, continuously for two hours without pause, often finishing writing as soon as Xu Qi'an finished speaking. Ordinary people couldn't keep up with that speed.[^1]

As expected of a fifth-rank Arcanist... Xu Qi'an marvelled, very satisfied.

The story itself was fairly average—at least in Xu Qi'an's opinion. But since commercial novels hadn't yet emerged in this era, even his crude story would be more engaging than most folk tales.

If only I had met Zhong Li six months earlier. I could dictate, and she would be my voice recognition system. I could open a bookstore and make a living selling storybooks...

Xu Qi'an quickly dismissed the idea. First, with his current status, he no longer needed to run a business. Second, the annual dividends from his share in the Chicken Bouillon enterprise were enough to support a life filled with wives and concubines.

Lastly, in his previous life, this kind of story wouldn't have been a big deal. But in this era, it would get him executed.

Not worth it, not worth it.

"This will do for now. I'll refine the second half later. Let's move on to the next book."

Zhong Li's fingers trembled slightly...

The second book was about the love story between a demonic empress and a human scholar. Xu Qi'an directly borrowed the formula of the domineering CEO trope from his past life, but reversed the gender roles.

The demonic empress was domineering, powerful, wise, and cold. The human scholar was knowledgeable, kind, and polite.

A classic Domineering Lady CEO versus Innocent Sweet Scholar dynamic.

Without a doubt, this story was meant for Huaiqing.

The book for Lin'an featured a heavenly princess and a humble guard, deliberately misleading Lin'an's perceptions of love and values.

When she became absorbed in the story, she would fantasize about a charming, capable, and witty "guard" figure.

Lin'an would soon realize: "Oh! Isn't my running dog just like that? My true love is right here by my side."

This was very plausible. After all, the noble ladies confined to their boudoirs were often obsessed with stories of talented scholars and beautiful ladies, dreaming that their future husbands would be just like those in the tales... the best example of this phenomenon.

As for Huaiqing, she was a tough nut to crack—smart, calm, and opinionated. Such a woman was hard to guide.

Xu Qi'an even suspected that Huaiqing didn't read those low-brow works. But of course, nothing was absolute. Huaiqing had the personality of a domineering CEO, and in a male-dominated world, it was almost impossible to find a novel like *Domineering Lady Empress Falls for Me*.

Xu Qi'an believed this would definitely pique Huaiqing's reading interest.

...

After dusk, at the dinner table.

Xu Erlang noticed that his elder brother was acting strange, staring at him constantly, with an intense and affectionate gaze, as if examining a treasured item.

“Big Brother, why do you keep staring at me?” Xu Erlang could no longer bear it and asked in a low voice.

“I’ve recently taken an interest in painting and want to use you as a model,” Xu Qi’an casually explained, continuing to stare at Xu Erlang intently.

So that’s what it is... Xu Erlang slightly raised his chin and nodded, “If you can capture even one-tenth of my handsomeness, consider yourself having made it.”

Uncle Xu couldn’t listen any longer. He tapped the table with his finger and changed the subject, “Yesterday, I heard you cut down a sixth-rank martial artist with one stroke?”

Xu Qi’an replied humbly, “Just a small fry.”

... Uncle Xu glanced at his son, then at his nephew, thinking to himself, _This arrogance and self-importance certainly aren't part of the Xu family tradition._

“Tomorrow is the day the exam results are released, right?” Auntie looked at Erlang.

“Hmm,” Xu Erlang nodded.

“You’re definitely going to be the *huiyuan*,” Auntie said happily, serving her son more food.

Uncle Xu glanced at his plump and beautiful wife and suddenly realized, _Ah, it’s this woman who has spoiled the family values._

“When the plum list is out, let’s all go and take a look together,” Xu Qi’an said.

Hearing the words “plum list,” Xu Lingyin immediately perked up.

“It’s not something to eat,” Xu Lingyue patted her head.

Xu Lingyin lowered her head and continued eating dinner.

After dinner, Xu Qi’an finished washing himself, and pulled the cork from a porcelain bottle. Mixing it with the water, he dunked his face into the concoction. After soaking his face for the time it takes to drink a cup of tea, his skin began to heat up, and his facial features showed signs of “melting.”

He immediately went to the bronze mirror and began practicing the qi circulation method he was not yet skilled in, attempting to change his facial features.

“Make the lips thinner, narrow the nose a bit... shrink the cheekbones... round out the eyes a little...”

After a quarter of an hour, the counterfeit Xu Erlang stood before the mirror. To be precise, it was Xu Erlang’s long-lost brother.

“Looks about halfway there.” Xu Qi’an admired himself in the mirror.

Looking like this, if I went and called Auntie “mother,” the whole family would believe it... no, no, put away such dangerous thoughts. It wouldn’t be good if Uncle and Auntie got divorced...

Thinking of this, Xu Qi’an’s lips curled into a smile, as countless mischievous ideas flashed through his mind.

Of course, if I were to disguise myself as Erlang and meet the members of the Earth Book chat group in real life, that would be quite amusing.

It wasn’t because he feared social death, he simply thought it would be fun.

“Life is so dull, one must find ways to entertain oneself... It’s been a while since I went to the brothels to listen to music.”

...

The Spring Examination results were also called the “Plum List” because it coincided with the blooming season of plum blossoms.

On the twenty-seventh day of the second month, at dawn.

There was no curfew that night, the city gates were wide open, soldiers patrolled the streets, and almost all of the Nightwatchers’ Bronze Gongs were out in force.

Countless scholars flocked to the Inner City, gathering at the gate of the Imperial Examination Hall, eagerly awaiting the posting of the results.

This year’s Spring Examination was particularly lively, not only because of the thousands of anxious scholars but also because of the Conflict of Heaven and Man within the Daoist sects, drawing a flood of Jianghu figures into the capital.

Jianghu folk had one defining trait: they loved gossip!

Wherever there was excitement, they would gather.

This created enormous pressure on the city’s Five Guards, the local government, and the Nightwatchers to maintain public order.

In the end, even Xu Pingzhi couldn’t accompany his son to see the results because the area he was responsible for was too far from the Examination Hall. Similarly, Xu Qi’an had his own district to patrol.

Jianghu folk were a mixed bag. If there were spies or anarchists among them, the scholars could be in danger.

Auntie, Lingyue, and Lingyin also wanted to join in on the excitement, so Second Uncle had no choice but to arrange for the family guards to accompany them. Xu Qi’an, on the other hand, believed that since his patrol area was near the Examination Hall, he could keep an eye on both.

It wasn’t a big deal.

“The Spring Examination results day has always been this lively. The court has nurtured scholars for years, and it all comes down to today.”

The middle-aged swordsman, leading Young Master Liu and other juniors, walked through the crowded streets, speaking at length, "Back in my youth, while traveling through the capital, I happened to witness this scene during the Spring Examination.

"The top scorer at that time was a man named Chu Yuanzhen, who later became the zhuangyuan. When I arrived in the capital this time, I inquired and learned that the former top scholar had since resigned from office.

"Ah, time flies, a decade has passed in the blink of an eye."

"Oh, he resigned?" The woman with the "Soul-stealing Hand," Rongrong, asked curiously:

"Why is that? I've heard that those who rank in the top tier can enter the Hanlin Academy and eventually become Prime Ministers. Why give up such a bright future?"

The middle-aged swordsman shook his head.

As they continued walking, they found it increasingly difficult to move forward, surrounded by scholars in Confucian robes and numerous Jianghu figures.

The soldiers were struggling to maintain order, shouting commands loudly.

"Master, why don't we leap across the rooftops to get a better view?" Young Master Liu suggested.

"Do you want to be cut down by the Nightwatchers with a single slash, or pierced through the heart by the Huben Guards' arrows?" The middle-aged swordsman retorted with irritation.

In an open space closer to the Examination Hall, a sedan chair draped in red silk had stopped. Surrounding it were armed guards, along with two petite maids.

"Chun'er, how much longer until the results are posted?"

A melodious, gentle female voice came from within the sedan.

"Miss, there's still thirty minutes," replied the maid named Chun'er, who stood on tiptoe to glance at the sundial in the distance.

The lady in the sedan was the daughter of Wang Wenzhen, the current Grand Secretary of the court. She loved attending poetry and literary gatherings hosted by scholars and had a natural inclination for joining lively events like the announcement of the Spring Examination results.

This Miss Wang was known for her literary talent. Though not as dazzlingly brilliant as Princess Huaiqing, had she been born a man, passing the provincial examination would have been effortless for her.

"I wonder who will be the huiyuan this year," Chun'er said sweetly.

Miss Wang smiled and shook her head gently.

Spring Examination fraud was rampant, although not as blatant as before, the manipulations were still considerable. The title of huiyuan might seem impressive to the common folk, but to those truly in the know, they could only salute and say:

"Brother, you're loaded!"

Of course, every now and then, a golden phoenix might land in the chicken coop, and there would still be deserving talents who would claim the crown.

At that moment, the other maid, who had remained silent, suddenly pointed into the distance and exclaimed, "What a handsome scholar!"

Miss Wang lifted the curtain, revealing a small gap, and peeked outside.

She quickly spotted the scholar the maid had mentioned, as he was so strikingly handsome that even though he frowned while being jostled by the crowd, his beauty was still unblemished.

His eyebrows were delicately long, his eyes shone like stars, his lips were rosy, and his teeth gleamed white. His fair skin was even more exquisite than that of most women.

Behind him was a noblewoman with an oval face, dressed in luxurious clothing, her hair adorned with a golden hairpin.

Beside the noblewoman was a graceful and elegant young girl, whose beauty even made Miss Wang, confident in her own looks, feel a moment of awe.

...

Auntie, protected by a group of guards, wasn't pushed around by the crowd, but she began to regret coming out to join the excitement.

Besides the noisy scholars, there were also many coarse and fierce Jianghu figures with brutish faces. This made Auntie, who only dared to strike heavy blows at her nephew and husband at home, feel anxious.

Whenever she went out, she was often ogled by some lecherous men, though they were more discreet. However, the rough Jianghu folk around them were blatantly leering.

Auntie furrowed her delicate brows, feeling the helplessness of being a natural beauty unable to escape such attention.

"Let's stop here," Xu Erlang said, coming to a halt. "Once the results are posted, someone will announce them aloud. We can listen from here."

Auntie breathed a sigh of relief and took Erlang's hand, saying, "Your mother has worked hard for your success."

"...Thank you, Mother," Xu Erlang responded.

The Plum List was posted on the east wall of the Examination Hall, also known as the "Wall of Fame." As time passed, the moment for the announcement finally arrived.

First, they revealed the secondary list.

Even the secondary list alone stirred the crowd of scholars. Some cheered, others wept bitterly, presenting a vivid display of human emotions to all present.

"Reveal the list! It's time to announce the Plum List!"

The scholars shouted excitedly, their collective enthusiasm building to a fever pitch.

Chapter 279. Can't Bring Myself to Cut Your Head Off

“Rank 460: Yang Zhen, of the Imperial Academy. Rank 459: Li Zhuming, of Hushui Commandery, Qingzhou...”

The official standing under the "Wall of Fame" loudly announced the rankings. As soon as he began, the once noisy crowd of scholars immediately quieted down in unison.

Thousands of students pricked up their ears, listening intently. Upon hearing their own names, some burst into tears of joy, while others cheered wildly.

“Erlang, why haven't we heard your name yet?” Auntie asked anxiously.

“Mother, they've only just reached the hundreds.” Xu Lingyue comforted her. “Didn't you say Second Brother would be the _huiyuan_?”

Auntie glared at her daughter. This cheeky girl even dared to tease her.

“Erlang, they haven't called you yet.”

When they reached the fifties, Auntie became even more nervous, her brows furrowed tightly.

“Just wait a little longer,” Xu Erlang said, frowning.

As they approached the top ten, Auntie's face turned pale, feeling that her son was very likely to fail.

Xu Xinnian, meanwhile, was both anxious and excited. It was a moment of make-or-break. Thinking of his elder brother's poem *Travelling is Hard* and his own diligent efforts, he still had a bit of confidence.

Finally, the voice called out: “This exam's _huiyuan_, Xu Xinnian, of Cloud Deer Academy, native of the capital.”

Auntie felt a loud "boom" in her ears, like a clap of thunder. Her whole body trembled.

That same thunderous sound echoed in the ears of the thousands of scholars and Nightwatchers nearby. Their first thought was: Impossible!

It was impossible that a student of Cloud Deer Academy had become the huiyuan. The conflict between the orthodox schools of Confucianism had spanned two hundred years, and students from Cloud Deer Academy were notoriously suppressed in officialdom. This was an undisputed fact.

In such a context, how could the _huiyuan_ possibly be from Cloud Deer Academy?

The last time a student from Cloud Deer Academy achieved the title of _huiyuan_ was twenty years ago with the scholar Ziyang Jushi. But Ziyang Jushi was no ordinary person.

He was a Confucian master of the fourth rank.

Looking back twenty years later, it made sense that he had become _huiyuan_ and even the _zhuangyuan_. He was, after all, a hidden dragon.

But now, considering that this student from Cloud Deer Academy had fought his way through thousands of contenders to become _huiyuan_, could it be that he too possessed the potential of a great Confucian?

At this moment, many hearts were moved.

These were wealthy families or officials eyeing prospective sons-in-law from the examination results.

Matchmaking after the examination results had always been a tradition. Though it wasn't as popular during the era of Yuanjing, many families still waited by the Plum List to find a suitable son-in-law.

They were looking for a scholar with outstanding talent, someone with the potential of a hidden dragon—like the _huiyuan_ Xu Xinnian.

This practice, known as list matchmaking, referred to wealthy families scouting out promising scholars after the examination results were posted. They would then send a matchmaker to the scholar's family to propose marriage. Timing was crucial—once the match was made, the marriage was settled, and no one else could take the scholar away.

In an era where decorum and law were paramount, no one could back out of a marriage without severely jeopardizing their future, unless they were prepared to forsake their ambitions.

“Which one is Xu Xinnian?”

“Who is Xu Xinnian's father?”

Voices of inquiry arose from the crowd.

A student turned his head and, scanning the sea of people, spotted the dazed face of Xu Xinnian. Immediately, he shouted, “Congratulations, Cijiu! Xu Xinnian is over there.”

A wave of people rushed forward, but surprisingly, it wasn't the scholars leading the charge—it was those interested in list matchmaking, accompanied by their guards, who quickly surrounded Xu Xinnian.

“Does the _huiyuan_ Xu Xinnian have a fiancée? I have a daughter, aged sixteen, as beautiful as a flower, who would love to marry such a fine gentleman.”

“I too have an unmarried daughter at home, skilled in music, go, calligraphy, and painting.”

Xu Xinnian kept backing away.

Chun'er stood on tiptoe, watching the scene for a moment. Delighted, she said, “_List matchmaking_ is really interesting. Miss, I didn't expect that the _huiyuan_ would be that handsome scholar.”

Before her voice had even faded, the window curtain was suddenly lifted, revealing sweet Miss Wang, with a scholarly air and a hint of baby fat on her cheeks. She peeked out for a brief moment and then said, “Chun'er, let's head back.”

Meanwhile, Xu Xinnian, who had never seen such a commotion before, frowned.

Just as he was about to yell at the unruly crowd to back off, he noticed several shady Jianghu men pushing against the guards, trying to harass his mother and sister.

The guards were forced to retreat step by step, and Auntie and Lingyue screamed in fright.

“Stop!”

Xu Erlang shouted loudly.

But it was no use. He couldn't stop so many people.

“Hmph, such scoundrels. No real skill, but they sure know how to take advantage of chaos,” the middle-aged swordsman observed from afar, sneering. He didn't pay much attention though, as such small disturbances would soon be dealt with by the Nightwatchers and the constables. However, those two stunningly beautiful women might get a bit of a fright.

“Stop!”

Suddenly, a deafening voice boomed. This time, it wasn't just metaphorical thunder, but an actual explosion of sound. The thousands of people present were left dizzy and disoriented, their ears ringing.

The commotion came to an abrupt halt.

On the wall of the Examination Hall stood a young man dressed in the uniform of a Nightwatcher, with a silver gong on his chest. He rested one hand on his sword, his sharp gaze sweeping over the troublemaking Jianghu men.

At the same time, the constables and Nightwatchers finally forced their way through the crowd and arrived.

The moment Auntie saw Xu Qi'an, she felt an overwhelming sense of relief, as if she had found her anchor. Both mother and daughter sighed in relief.

“Take those troublemakers away,” Xu Qi'an commanded, pointing out the Jianghu men one by one. The nearby Bronze Gongs immediately stepped forward to apprehend them.

The scholars below recognized Xu Qi'an and were delighted, shouting, “It's Master Poet Xu!”

“Greetings, Master Poet Xu!”

Many of the capital's scholars greeted him with respectful salutes, as if meeting a senior or mentor.

In truth, Xu Qi'an indeed deserved such respect. With his renowned poems alone, even the proudest of scholars dared not act haughtily in his presence.

However, scholars from outside the capital didn't know his identity. Seeing him dressed as a Nightwatcher, they initially looked down on him. But the capital scholars' attitude made them realize this young Silver Gong was no ordinary figure.

“Brother, who is this? He looks so flamboyant, must be just a military man, right?”

“You don’t recognize him? Ah, you’re not from the capital. This gentleman is Xu Qi’an—the one who wrote *subtle fragrance drifts with the rising moon at dusk.*”

“...So it’s him. Indeed, he is a man of extraordinary presence, a true dragon among men, inspiring awe at first glance.”

With that, the scholars from outside the capital realized who he was. Xu Qi’an had many admirers, and thanks to the poems he had “borrowed,” he had amassed a huge following among the scholars of the Great Feng Dynasty.

At once, countless scholars greeted him, hailing him as “Master Poet Xu.”

“So impressive...” Xu Lingyue murmured.

“So impressive...”

From afar, Miss Rongrong gazed at the young man on the wall with admiration in her eyes.

“Clearly I’m meant to be the protagonist here...” Xu Xinnian tutted softly.

...

Xu Xinnian not only passed the metropolitan exam, but ranked first as Huiyuan!

This was something no one in the family had anticipated.

Auntie was so overjoyed she nearly fainted, much like the female version of Fan Jin in that famous tale.

Second Uncle was also elated, deciding to host a grand banquet at home, inviting relatives and colleagues for a celebratory feast. Now that the Xu family was quite well-off, they could easily afford a three-day-long banquet.

After lunch, Xu Erlang set down his chopsticks, looked at Xu Qi’an, and said, “Big Brother, are you going to patrol the streets today?”

Xu Qi’an shook his head.

He was a Silver Gong, and patrolling the streets was typically at his discretion, not a mandatory duty. Besides, now that the rankings had been posted, the thousands of scholars had returned home, relieving some of the morning’s security pressure.

Xu Erlang nodded, stood up, placed one hand on his abdomen, the other behind his back, and said lightly, “Then, Brother, I’ll trouble you to guard the door. This afternoon, I’m sure there will be some annoying flies buzzing around. I won’t see anyone!”

His posture resembled that of a highly respected teacher or official.

Hey, this little rascal is really getting into character... Xu Qi’an’s lips twitched.

Xu Xinnian’s prideful personality was clearly inherited from Auntie. However, his sharp tongue was self-developed—Auntie’s scolding skills were quite average; otherwise, she wouldn’t be so easily infuriated by Xu Qi’an.

Xu Qi’an returned to his room, sat at his desk, and started pondering Xu Erlang’s future.

Erlang being named Huiyuan was beyond my expectations. Next is the palace exam in a month. After that, I can activate the back-up plan I planted (through Minister Zhao of the Ministry of Personnel)...

Staying in the capital is only the first step. If I want Erlang to become someone useful to me, I need to find him a solid backing. Otherwise, with his status as a student from Cloud Deer Academy, he'll be stuck in a low-ranking post for life...

Duke Wei isn't the Left Censor-in-Chief anymore. I wonder if he can regain such an important position. But Erlang can't rely on Wei Yuan. Any association with him would brand him with the same stigma as me—the 'Eunuch Clique'.

He frowned. *I can't put all my eggs in one basket. I need to find another patron for Erlang. Only then can we, as brothers, hope to dominate the court together.*

Xu Qi'an had once joked about grooming Xu Xinnian to become the Prime Minister of the Great Feng. While it had been a jest, he was serious about elevating Xu Erlang's position.

After everything that had happened and all the enemies he had made, this plan had become even more necessary.

First of all, Xu Erlang had exceptional talent and was following the orthodox Confucian path. He also had a decent grasp of political maneuvering. With a few years of experience, he would be an invaluable ally.

But the downside of being from the orthodox Confucian tradition was clear—he was an orphan in the political landscape.

"Princess Huaiqing, while capable, is a woman. I suspect she is secretly building her own power, but Erlang needs a strong patron, not someone leading an underground faction.

"As for the Crown Prince, after the incident with Consort Fu, I've fallen out with his mother, so he's not an option. Besides, the Crown Prince's rank is too low—he doesn't match up with my Erlang. The Fourth Prince is similarly out of the question."

After mentally reviewing the options, Xu Qi'an realized he couldn't find a suitable patron in the civil servants.

Sigh... This isn't urgent. After the imperial exam, Erlang's matters will be put on hold for now. What I need to focus on is the Buddhist envoy, and Li Miaozen and Chu Yuanzhens's "Conflict of Heaven and Man"... This kind of doctrinal struggle is always troublesome, Xu Qi'an rubbed his temples, muttering:

"For me, though, the most important thing is to quickly advance to the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage."

After washing his face, Xu Qi'an left his house. As a busy Silver Gong, he had no time to stand guard for someone like Xu Erlang.

He rode his little mare, carrying the two novels Zhongli had written, and quickly made his way to the imperial city. Presenting the jade pendant gifted to him by Princess Lin'an, he was led by the Imperial Guards to Shaoyin Courtyard.

Princess Lin'an was delighted by Xu Qi'an's sudden visit, instructing her maids to serve the best tea and pastries to entertain her "Running Dog."

"How has Your Highness been lately?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Lin'an sighed, her charming peach blossom eyes dimming as she complained, "My mother consort cries to me every day, saying she's bullied by the Empress in the palace and can hardly go on."

What about the people backing Consort Chen? Aren't they stepping in to help...? Hmm, Consort Chen is a capable palace schemer. She can't be doing that poorly. She's probably just putting on an act for Lin'an, hoping for a roundabout way to solve her problems... Xu Qi'an mused and then asked curiously:

"Has the Empress gone too far? Can Your Highness not stand up for Consort Chen?"

"What can I do against Huaiqing? Besides, I don't think my mother is as pitiful as she claims," Lin'an pouted, clearly feeling wronged.

"Why don't you ask His Majesty for help?" Xu Qi'an suggested cautiously.

"Everyone, leave us," Lin'an waved her hand, dismissing the maids.

The room fell silent, with no one speaking for a long time.

"Running Dog..."

Her soft, weary voice finally broke the silence.

"Yes, Your Highness, I'm listening."

"When the Crown Prince was imprisoned in the High Court, I went to plead with Father, but he refused to see me. I stood in the cold for two hours before Huaiqing sent me away..."

Lin'an lowered her head, looking like a small, dejected animal, and said quietly, "That was when I started to think that maybe Father doesn't love me as much as I thought. After the Crown Prince got into trouble, none of my brothers and sisters played with me anymore. That's when I realized they never truly liked me..."

Her eyebrows drooped, and her once-clear and enchanting peach blossom eyes were now dim, her head slightly bowed. She no longer looked like a princess, but a wronged and pitiful girl.

Xu Qi'an understood that this was how much Lin'an trusted him. She was shedding the pride of a princess, revealing not a particularly foolish girl, but not too clever either.

These feelings had probably been bottled up inside her for a long time... likely since the Crown Prince's downfall, when she first realized this harsh reality. Yet she had hidden it well, maintaining her princess's pride.

It wasn't until after the Consort Fu case was resolved that she fully grasped the truth behind the matter... What must her emotions have been like then? Sadness, helplessness, disappointment?

This princess, who appeared arrogant and spoiled on the outside, was in fact like a paper tiger—blustering and loud when wronged, but quietly enduring the real heartaches.

Essentially, she was a beautiful yet fragile woman, strong in appearance but weak inside.

Lin'an's eyes gradually grew misty. Speaking these words made her feel better. Even though her "Running Dog" couldn't really help her, and he hesitated even to stand up to Huaiqing on her behalf, the fact that he was willing to offend Huaiqing for her sake had already made her quite happy.

Suddenly, a hand pressed gently on her head and ruffled her hair.

Startled, Lin'an looked up, only to see that her "Running Dog" had, at some point, walked over to her side. His gaze held a mixture of pity for her misfortune and frustration at her helplessness.

"Your Highness, I'll be here with you," he said softly.

Lin'an's face slowly turned red, and in a voice as soft as a mosquito's whisper, she murmured, "You... you shouldn't touch my head... I'll get mad."

Xu Qi'an, in complete defiance of the princess's orders, ruffled her hair even harder, messing it up entirely.

Lin'an opened her peach blossom eyes wide, glaring at him as if trying to use her royal authority to drive him away. But though her eyes were charming and full of emotion, they had no real power to intimidate.

Then, Lin'an lowered her head again.

Hmm, for girls with this kind of personality, a mix of assertiveness and persistence works best... If it were Huaiqing, I'd probably have been stabbed by now...

The atmosphere between them grew charged with subtle emotion.

Sensing it, Xu Qi'an withdrew his hand just in time. He reached into his robe, took out the storybook _"Great Sage of Love"_, and placed it in front of Lin'an, smiling.

"This is a book I came across by chance. It's quite interesting. Since you like stories, I think you'll enjoy reading it. Just make sure no one knows it came from me."

Lin'an's attention immediately shifted to the book.

"If life in the palace ever gets too dull, you could always move to Lin'an Mansion. That way, I could visit you every day and even sneak you outside," he suggested playfully.

After a few more words, he prepared to take his leave.

"Xu Qi'an!" Lin'an called after him, puffing out her cheeks and threatening in a fierce but adorable tone, "Today's events must not be mentioned to anyone. Otherwise, otherwise..."

She wanted to say "I'll have your head cut off," but she couldn't quite bring herself to say it.

"Understood," Xu Qi'an replied with a grin.

...

After leaving Shaoyin Courtyard, Xu Qi'an approached the Imperial Guards and said, "I have urgent business with the Eldest Princess. Lead me to her."

"That's against the rules," the guard replied, shaking his head.

"I can wait outside the palace gates. That way, it'll be within the rules," Xu Qi'an said, slipping a ten-tael silver note into the guard's hand without a change in his expression.

The guard accepted and led Xu Qi'an out of the palace, letting him wait outside while he went to deliver the message.

In less than the time it took to burn a stick of incense, the guard returned and said, "Princess Huaiqing will see you."

Xu Qi'an's lips curled into a smirk as he pressed his hand to his chest, thinking to himself, _Huaiqing, oh Huaiqing, get ready to experience the power of the domineering boss and the sweet, innocent scholar routine. It's bound to hit all your weak spots._

Chapter 280. A Poem

Following the Yulin Guard to Dexin Pavilion, Xu Qi'an was informed that Princess Huaiqing had just finished her sword practice and was currently bathing, so he had to wait outside.

Heh, did she hear I was coming and deliberately decided to take a bath... Xu Qi'an's thoughts ran wild.

After waiting outside Dexin Pavilion for about half an hour, a young maid in a pale yellow palace gown stepped over the threshold and softly said, "Sir Xu, Her Highness will see you now."

Upon entering the elegant courtyard, he saw Princess Huaiqing in the reception hall. Having just bathed, her exquisitely beautiful face was tinged with a light flush, and her eyes sparkled brightly.

There was a new, softer allure about her, less of the lofty coldness she usually exuded.

It was like a jade statue of a beauty had suddenly come to life.

This is what true feminine charm looks like, Xu Qi'an thought. *Keeping up the icy, noble princess act every day isn't cute at all...* He cupped his hands in greeting: "Your humble servant greets Your Highness."

Huaiqing motioned for the maid to serve tea, her voice as clear and cold as ever, "What brings you here, Sir Xu?"

"My cousin has just passed the metropolitan exam, but he hails from Cloud Deer Academy. I am concerned for his future prospects," Xu Qi'an earnestly explained. "Does Your Highness have any wise counsel?"

If there's a problem I can't figure out, asking a clever person is the best course of action. *One must learn to use every tool at their disposal. If the princess has no ideas, I'll ask Wei Yuan.*

Huaiqing's gaze flickered, and she sipped her tea thoughtfully. She immediately grasped Xu Qi'an's meaning—he didn't want his cousin to be branded as part of the Eunuch Clique.

Clever people never put all their eggs in one basket.

Xu Ningyan may be a martial artist, but he's incredibly sharp... Huaiqing smiled faintly. "You've been to Qingzhou—how well do you know the situation there?"

"The governance is clear, and Ziyang Jushi has managed Qingzhou meticulously..."

As he spoke, Xu Qi'an suddenly understood Huaiqing's point. With Ziyang Jushi holding supreme authority in Qingzhou, any Cloud Deer Academy scholar sent there would have ample room to showcase their talents without fear of being suppressed.

"Qingzhou is a safe haven Ziyang Jushi has carved out for his Confucian scholars," the Princess explained without further pretence.

But I only have this one precious little brother. I don't want to send him off to a faraway place like Qingzhou... Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly. "I understand, Your Highness."

Fine, I'll have him stay in the capital for now and figure something out later. Who knows, maybe he'll find his own backer.

"By the way, does Your Highness enjoy reading novels?" Xu Qi'an's true intent finally emerged.

"I've never been interested in such things."

The princess's haughty tone was akin to a top scholar saying: *Web novels? Hah, I don't read that kind of thing!*

"I happened to come across an interesting book. If Your Highness ever has some free time, perhaps you might find it enjoyable... But please, keep it secret." Xu Qi'an pulled out *_Domineering Lady Empress Falls for Me_* and placed it on the table.

Huaiqing didn't even glance at it, offering only a polite nod.

After Xu Qi'an left, Huaiqing was about to instruct the maid to put the novel away, but as her eyes fell on the cover, she suddenly froze.

Domineering Lady Empress Falls for Me... Lady Empress?!

Such a scandalous title... Huaiqing's interest was piqued, and since she had nothing pressing to do, she figured a brief glance wouldn't hurt.

She sat down again, opening the outrageously titled novel.

The story told of a scholar who, by accident, ended up in the demon realm. Though brilliant and full of literary talent, the demons intended to eat him, preparing to fry him in oil.

At that moment, the Empress appeared—the only well-read figure in the demon realm, known for her vast intelligence and knowledge. She saved the scholar and kept him in her harem, where they exchanged poems and discussed the classics.

Throughout, the Empress maintained a cold and domineering attitude, though deep down, she cared for the scholar. Her favourite phrase was: "You're playing with fire."

Huaiqing had never encountered such an amusing novel before. It lacked any real depth or intellectual value, utterly unlike the complex, abstruse works she usually preferred.

Yet somehow, this simple, day-to-day story carried a strange charm.

Huaiqing found herself compelled to see how the Empress's "public shows of dominance" would play out next.

Yes, public shows of dominance—that was it.

Despite her cold and ruthless façade, the Empress harboured a tender heart. The scholar, on the other hand, doted on her, always considerate of her feelings. He would even get jealous when she drank with the demon generals.

Before she knew it, dusk had fallen—she'd been reading for over two hours.

Huaiqing also realized another benefit of this novel: it required no brainpower.

It was pure entertainment.

When she finished, however, a wave of anger surged within her. *What was I doing?*

Reading a book devoid of intellectual nourishment for two whole hours?! Wasn't that just a waste of life? How could I squander my time on something so frivolous and vapid?

She felt a deep sense of guilt.

"Just a trivial read..." Huaiqing muttered dismissively, tossing the book aside as she got up to leave the reception hall. But a few minutes later, she returned, tucked the book into her sleeve, and took it with her.

It definitely wasn't because she planned to review it again before bed, but rather because such a book could not be seen by others. It was like a secret novel for the boudoir—unfit for public view.

...

At the same time, in Shaoyin Pavilion, Lin'an was fully engrossed in *Great Sage of Love*.

"So... this is what romance between men and women is like... Ah, how could running dog give me such a book?"

Lin'an rolled around on her bed, her face flushed red. Reading the 5,000-word scene where Zixia Celestial and Long Aotian shared an intimate moment, she blushed furiously, muttering, "How awful, how terrible..."

Yet she read every word, carefully visualizing the entire scene in her mind.

She felt her body heat up, her legs occasionally rubbing against each other. Her round, tender face blushed like a ripe apple, and her alluring peach blossom eyes—already captivating—grew hazy with a soft, seductive mist.

But the bedroom activities were only a part of the story. At its core, it was the tale of Zixia Celestial and Long Aotian's love.

The first two-thirds were sweet and tender, but the last third... a knife to the heart.

When Long Aotian was skinned alive, his bones pulled out, and he was condemned to be reincarnated as a beast forever, while Zixia Celestial was imprisoned in the Palace of Eternal Cold, Lin'an realized her pillow was soaked with tears.

Sniffling, she grumbled, "Why isn't there any more? Running dog, why isn't there any more?"

After venting her frustration, she summoned her maids and said, "Prepare hot water, we wish to bathe."

"Now? But it's almost time for dinner..." the maid asked, confused.

Lin'an's cheeks flushed even deeper. "Do what we say!"

Soon, the water was heated, and the maids prepared the bath. Lin'an slipped her delicate body into the warm water, which was scattered with flower petals, her smooth shoulders and elegant collarbones peeking above the surface.

"Tell me," she suddenly asked, "among the guards at my side, who do you think is the most handsome, the most talented, and the most loyal to me?"

"They're all very loyal, Your Highness. As for who's the most talented or interesting, I'm not sure... But if it doesn't have to be a guard, I think I have someone in mind."

"Who?!" Lin'an immediately perked up.

"Sir Xu, of course! Sir Xu is handsome, talented, and always makes you laugh. He's not a guard, but you've recruited him as a close confidant. And though he's a Nightwatcher, not a scholar, he could still be considered a sort of protector, right?"

Lin'an bit her lip and gently stirred the petals. The water rippled, casting a blurry reflection of her face—delicate, rosy, and shy.

...

The Imperial City, Wang Manor!

Golden-red sunset streamed through the latticed windows of Prime Minister Wang's study. The fifty-something Wang Zhenwen finished reviewing his dossiers and swept them aside into a corner.

He then laid out a piece of paper, pressed it with a paperweight, and picked up a brush to begin writing... At that moment, the eldest daughter Miss Wang entered, carrying a bowl of goji and ginseng soup.

Wang Zhenwen ignored her and, riding the surge of inspiration swelling in his chest, began to write.

_ "Clear wine in golden goblets, ten thousand cash a cup, _

_ Delicacies on jade platters, a myriad silver more...." _

_ "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." _

Miss Wang placed the soup down and leaned over to take a look. She couldn't move her gaze for a long time, murmuring, "Father, you've penned a masterpiece destined for the ages.

"When this poem is published, it will surely shake the court."

As a literature enthusiast, her appreciation skills were still sharp. Miss Wang was utterly captivated by the grandeur of this poem.

Wang Zhenwen shook his head, took a sip of the ginseng soup, and exhaled contentedly. "This was not written by me. It was composed by the new _huiyuan_. Didn't you visit the examination halls today? Didn't you see him?"

"They say he's quite the striking figure, a rare handsome young man."

"I didn't meet him. I was just mingling in the crowd," Miss Wang denied quickly, her eyes flickering toward the desk.

"When I reinstated poetry into the civil examinations years ago, it took no small effort. The opposition was fierce," Wang Zhenwen tapped the paper with his fingers, his smile broad. "Now that such a fine work has emerged, I can finally hold my head high. It's a vindication for the scholars of the world, and for our ancestors. We didn't let the treasure of poetry fade into oblivion."

After the publishing of the Plum List, Xu Xinnian's poem *Travelling is Hard* quickly spread among the examiners, who praised it with enthusiasm, calling it stirring and inspiring. In a few more days, after it had time to percolate, this poem would be sung and celebrated throughout the capital.

"I heard that this huiyuan is a scholar of the Cloud Deer Academy," Miss Wang said "offhandedly."

Wang Zhenwen paused for a moment, then sighed. "What a pity."

The civil servants of the court were dismissive of the scholars from the Cloud Deer Academy. As the head of the civil officials, the Prime Minister could not relent on this stance.

The more talented Xu Xinnian was, the more wary Wang Zhenwen became—and the less likely he would make use of him.

"Dad!"

As Miss Wang helped gather the memorials, she said, "I would like to host a literary gathering at our residence and invite some of the well-known scholars of the capital. Under your name, of course."

The organizer of a literary gathering must be someone of high status and reputation, something Miss Wang didn't have on her own. However, she had organized many gatherings in the past, all under Wang Zhenwen's name.

With the spring exams just over, it was the perfect time to hold such an event.

Wang Zhenwen nodded. "Very well."

...

Qingyun Mountain, Cloud Deer Academy.

As the last rays of sunlight lingered, a rider sped down the main road, raising clouds of dust.

The horse stopped at the foot of the mountain, and a student in a scholar's robe leapt off, holding a list in his hand, and sprinted toward the peak.

"Good news, good news!"

He shouted as he ran, soon reaching the academy.

Along the way, several students heard the commotion and came out to ask what was going on, but the messenger ignored them all, heading straight for Great Scholar Zhang Shen's study.

Hearing the noise, Zhang Shen was already waiting outside, his face composed as he watched the approaching student.

"A scholar must maintain a calm mind. Neither great joy nor great sorrow should sway one's heart."

After this gentle reminder, Zhang Shen smiled. "Judging by your excitement, I assume all our students passed the exams."

"Sir, not only did they pass," the student exclaimed, "Xu Xinnian placed first as the huiyuan."

Zhang Shen thought he had misheard and asked sternly, "The huiyuan?!"

The student nodded emphatically. "The huiyuan, it's true! I have the names of the academy's students from the Plum List—Xu Xinnian is at the top, without a doubt."

Zhang Shen snatched the list and looked it over. He saw the list of candidates, with their academies and backgrounds, ranked in order.

At the top: Xu Cijiu, first place, huiyuan.

Zhang Shen stared at the list for a long moment, then suddenly let out a loud cry: "Dean, Chen Tai, Li Mubai... My student got the huiyuan, my student got the huiyuan!"

The messenger was dumbfounded.

Soon enough, Dean Zhao Shou and two other Great Scholars, Li Mubai and Chen Tai, arrived on the scene, appearing at Zhang Shen's study by sheer force of bullshit will, despite the distance.

The elderly, scruffy Dean Zhao Shou was the first to ask, "Is it true? Which student placed first?"

"Xu Cijiu!" Zhang Shen declared proudly.

Zhao Shou frowned, pondering for a moment, then remembered. "Ah, the student who's never lost an argument?"

"...This shows his eloquence is unmatched," Zhang Shen replied.

"Congratulations, congratulations!" Li Mubai and Chen Tai, though genuinely pleased, couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy.

It was only natural for all the scholars at Cloud Deer Academy to celebrate when one of their own became the huiyuan, and the teachers would be no exception. In fact, they might even dance and drink the night away.

Yet their envy lingered, as Xu Cijiu was Zhang Shen's student.

Zhao Shou frowned again. "In theory, he shouldn't have won first place. What kind of essay did Xu Cijiu write?"

Based on previous exams, there was certainly cheating going on this year. As a scholar from the Cloud Deer Academy, Xu Cijiu wouldn't have had the chance to cheat.

Yet to think he won purely by merit seemed a bit far-fetched.

Zhang Shen, having calmed down somewhat, admitted, "Xu Cijiu's essays were excellent, but to call them extraordinary might be an overstatement."

Yet how could a merely "excellent" essay have won over two of the three examiners?

Just moments ago, when the student brought the news, even Zhang Shen had doubted it.

Li Mubai, noticing the messenger still present, waved him over and asked, "What other news from the capital?"

It was a casual question, but the messenger quickly nodded. "There is indeed more, sir. After copying the Plum List, I found Xu Xinnian's achievement rather unusual, so I invited one of the examiners for a meal.

"The 'meal cost' came to fifteen taels, which I'll be expensing from the academy."

The Great Scholars nodded approvingly. Cloud Deer Academy students were resourceful and capable, not rigid or overly conservative.

The messenger continued and took out a slip of paper from his robe. "The examiner said that Xu Xinnian composed a poem during the third session, which deeply impressed the Grand Scholar of the Eastern Pavilion. The other examiners were also convinced, and since his previous exam scores were outstanding, that's how he became the huiyuan."

"A poem?"

The Great Scholars exchanged glances.