

## Nightwatcher 281

Chapter 281. Light of the Buddha

The three great scholars tacitly refrained from taking the paper and instead exchanged knowing glances.

Seeing this, Dean Zhao Shou reached out, took the folded rice paper, and slowly unfolded it. He then fell into a long silence.

Sensing something unusual, Zhang Shen cautiously asked, "Dean?"

But Zhao Shou ignored him, mumbling softly to himself, caught in some emotion he couldn't immediately shake off.

After a while, Zhao Shou stroked his beard and smiled. "What a fine poem! I will personally have this inscribed in the Hall of the Lesser Sage, making it a part of Cloud Deer Academy's legacy. In the future, when descendants look back on this history, this poem alone will suffice.

"Tonight, the three of you shall come to my residence. We'll drink and celebrate until dawn."

The three scholars found it hard to believe. For Zhao Shou, the leading figure of Confucianism in this era, to be so moved by a single poem was almost unheard of. Even when praised with masterpieces like "Drunk, he knows not if the sky floats in the water;

His dream laden boat sailing atop the Milky way", Zhao Shou had merely smiled in approval.

"See for yourselves!" Zhao Shou handed over the paper.

Zhang Shen took it and read it together with the other two great scholars. Their expressions froze, and they, like Zhao Shou earlier, were overwhelmed by emotions they couldn't immediately shake off.

"“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.” Li Mubai suddenly broke into tears, lamenting, "This poem speaks of our Cloud Deer Academy."

Zhang Shen and Chen Tai clenched their fists in agreement. They now understood why Zhao Shou had lost his composure. Li Mubai was right—this poem was written for the Cloud Deer Academy.

Looking back on the past two centuries since the Imperial Academy was founded, Cloud Deer Academy had entered its darkest period. Its students burned the midnight oil, striving for greatness, but their efforts were met only with suppression. Their burning passion and vast talents were left with nowhere to be displayed.

\*Yet I spurn my drink and toss my chopsticks, food left untouched, Drawing my sword, with empty heart and unclear thoughts.\*

But those final two lines were truly a stroke of genius, filling the great scholars with a renewed sense of grandeur and a surge of excitement.

The greatest power of poetry is its ability to evoke shared feelings, and it had struck right at the hearts of Zhao Shou and the three scholars.

"Dean..."

Zhang Shen coughed, breaking free from the intense emotions. He said softly, "Xu Cijiu is my student. I worked painstakingly to teach him."

"You have worked hard, Jinyan," Zhao Shou said with gratitude.

"Training talented individuals for the Academy is my duty; there is no hardship in that," Zhang Shen said righteously. "But I do have a small request that I hope you will consider."

Chen Tai and Li Mubai immediately grew cautious.

Zhao Shou smiled warmly. "What is your request?"

"When you personally inscribe this poem, please make sure to add a few small words after Xu Cijiu's name: 'Student of Zhang Shen, style name Jinyan, from Jingzhou.'"

Before Zhao Shou could respond, Chen Tai and Li Mubai objected, "I oppose this!"

Zhang Shen was furious. "He is my student! What does this have to do with you? Who are you to object?"

"Nonsense!" The two scholars glared at him, not holding back as they exposed the truth. "You know your student's capabilities as well as anyone! How dare you pretend not to know who really wrote this poem?"

Zhang Shen knew all too well. Xu Cijiu was his student, and as his teacher, he was well aware of his abilities. As for how Xu Cijiu managed to guess the exam topic, Zhang Shen assumed that Xu Qi'an had sought Wei Yuan's help.

"Hmm?" Zhao Shou raised a brow in suspicion, cutting off the hearing of the messenger student nearby. "What were you just saying? Xu Cijiu didn't write this poem?"

Chen Tai snorted. "Xu Cijiu excels in policy discussions, but his poetry is mediocre. How could he produce such a soul-stirring masterpiece?"

Li Mubai chimed in, "It was undoubtedly written by my student, Xu Qi'an."

"When did Xu Qi'an become your student?" Zhang Shen scoffed. "If anything, he's my student. So no matter what, it's still my name that belongs on the poem."

The three great scholars began to argue noisily.

Zhao Shou listened for a moment, then slowly understood. This poem had not been written by Xu Cijiu, but rather by his renowned cousin, who had been lauded as the Master of Poetry in the literary world.

In that case, Xu Cijiu had cheated as well.

"By the way, what is our huiyuan's specialty?" Zhao Shou asked.

In Confucianism, character was paramount, especially for the higher-ranking scholars. Every great scholar upheld a strong moral compass. But that didn't mean they were all sages—unless they had explicitly set "sageness" as their defining mission in life. Otherwise, small transgressions could be overlooked.

But cheating was not a minor offense.

"His specialty is governance and military strategy," Zhang Shen said, as he himself was a great scholar known for his expertise in military matters.

Governance was a fundamental subject every Confucian scholar had to study, but beyond that, they could choose one or two areas to specialize in. Some scholars focused on the \_Book of Rites\_, while others delved into the \_Doctrine of the Mean\_. Xu Cijiu's area of expertise was military strategy.

Upon hearing this, Zhao Shou nodded in relief. Specializing in military strategy meant there wouldn't be any issues with his future advancement.

"You needn't argue over a single poem. I believe that Xu Qi'an used his cousin's hand to offer this poem to the Academy. That is the greatest gift we could receive," Zhao Shou said.

"Our Dean speaks the truth," the three great scholars said in unison.

They also silently added in their minds: \*That sneaky bastard Yang Gong!\*

...

The next day, the Xu Residence hosted a grand banquet, inviting friends and family. As per Xu Xinnian's arrangements, the guests were divided into three groups: the front yard, the back inner yard, and the central courtyard.

In the central courtyard sat his classmates and friends, while the inner courtyard, which was off-limits to outsiders, was reserved for family members. The front yard was for Uncle Xu and Xu Qi'an's colleagues.

The three groups of guests were perfectly separated, each enjoying their own drinking and banter. The scholars ignored the rough martial artists, and the martial artists paid no attention to the scholars' pretentious airs.

"Erlang truly has the mind of a scholar, arranging everything so neatly," Xu Qi'an remarked while escorting his younger brother around to toast the guests.

"Why didn't our teacher come?" he added.

Xu Erlang, his face slightly flushed from a few drinks, sighed as he exhaled the scent of alcohol.

"The servant who delivered the invitation this morning brought back word that Teacher got into a fight with two other great scholars and was injured."

"Another fight?" Xu Qi'an thought to himself, wondering if all Cloud Deer Academy scholars had such bad tempers.

The two brothers then made their way to the inner courtyard, where their family members were seated. Auntie and Second Uncle remained at the table, keeping company with the Xu clan. A few children, having eaten their fill, played in the courtyard, envious of the Xu Family's large estate.

Xu Lingyin, too shy to join her playmates, had been eating non-stop and would rather die than move from her seat.

The Xu clan members were overjoyed. Not long ago, Xu Dalang had been ennobled, and now, Xu Erlang had just passed the metropolitan examination as the huiyuan. These were clear signs that the Xu family was on the rise.

While the younger generation was excited, many of them also thought about how they might benefit from this great pillar, hoping that one day they might achieve success and fame themselves.

The joy of the elders was more straightforward. Some wept with happiness, proclaiming that their ancestors must have blessed them and that the Xu clan was destined to become a great family.

"Lyu Er'dan," one of the clan elders stood up, patting Xu Pingzhi on the back of his hand, speaking with gratitude. "With Dalang and Erlang both turning out so well, you deserve much of the credit. One scholar and one warrior, both trained by you. You're even better than the Confucian teachers! I have a pair of grandsons at home. Er'dan, could you help guide them for a few years?"

Lyu Er'dan, "Second donkey egg" was Second Uncle Xu Pingzhi's childhood name. Hence Xu Qi'an's father would naturally be called: Lyu Yidan, "First donkey egg".

Only the elderly members of the clan still used these childhood names.

"Hahaha, no problem! Uncle, feel free to send those two rascals over to me!" Xu Pingzhi, riding high on the praise, beamed with pride. He even began to feel that Xu Cijiu and Xu Ningyan's successes were thanks to his own efforts.

\_What effort? You're no more than a reckless man, Xu Pingzhi...\_ Xu Qi'an thought with a smile, mocking him internally.

\_Father truly has no self-awareness. You're just a coarse warrior,\_ Xu Xinnian silently grumbled in his heart.

Auntie, sitting silently, felt disgruntled that no one praised her for raising such talented children. But remembering her past conflicts with her nephews, she knew that if she tried to take credit, she'd surely be rebuked.

...

The western gate, the Capital.

The soldiers on guard suddenly heard faint chanting of Buddhist scriptures, as if coming from the heavens.

A soldier scratched his ear, only to realize the chanting still echoed in his mind. "Hey, do you hear something strange...?"

Before he could finish his question, he noticed his comrades around him doing the same, digging into their ears.

Just then, someone atop the city wall shouted, "Buddha's light! In the west, there's Buddha's light!"

The soldiers below instinctively tightened their grips on their spears, looking out warily into the distance. A few seconds later, they saw a golden light slowly rising from the west, glowing like the first rays of dawn... but purer, and more comforting.

Unknowingly, the soldiers began to loosen their grips on their spears, their eyes filled with devotion and serenity, as if their hearts had been cleansed by the light.

The centurion in charge bit his tongue hard, the pain shocking his brain back into temporary clarity, allowing him to resist the "devotion" welling up inside him.

He stumbled over to the dazed soldiers, pushing them aside as he grabbed the hammer and pounded it against the war drum, striking it again and again.

\_Boom, boom, boom...\_

The dull sound of the drum reverberated through the air, echoing in the hearts of the guards, echoing in the hearts of the people of the western city.

...

"They've arrived!"

Xu Qi'an, in the middle of raising a glass to toast a guest, suddenly heard the murmurs of the monk Shenshu in his mind.

\*Arrived? What has arrived?\*

Xu Qi'an froze for a moment before realizing—The emissaries from the Buddhist sect have arrived.

\*Finally... the monks from the Western Regions have arrived in the capital.\*

\*They had come because of the Sangpo case, because of the monk Shenshu.\*

Their intentions were far from friendly.

Xu Qi'an had been in this world for more than half a year, and this would be his first direct encounter with the high monks of the Western Buddhist sect.

\_The Jianzheng has already shielded me from the heavens, so the monks shouldn't be able to detect the existence of Shenshu. But as the lead investigator of the Sangpo case, there's no way I can avoid interacting with these monks...\_

\_I've heard the Buddhist sects possess all sorts of strange abilities, like mind-reading techniques. If that's true, could they hear my thoughts?\_

Xu Qi'an felt as though he were facing a formidable foe.

## Chapter 282. Li Yuchun's Lifelong Enemy

The sun was high, and the banquet was in full swing. After making a round of toasts, Xu Qi'an excused himself under the pretext of going to the toilet and returned to his study, pondering how to handle the emissary from the Western Region's Buddhist sect.

Zhong Li sat at the square table, head bowed, taking small bites of her meal.

Based on the research he had done recently, Xu Qi'an believed that the emissaries from the Buddhist sect had two main objectives in visiting the capital.

The primary goal, of course, was to investigate the Sangpo case—this was the main reason for their visit.

\*The question is, whether the baldies are just here to gather information, or if they intend to stay in the capital and actively search for clues on Shenshu... I suppose they'll only make that decision after they get a clearer picture of the situation,\* Xu Qi'an mused, twirling his brush.

Their secondary objective might be to come and demand answers.

The relationship between the Buddhist sect and the Great Feng was complicated. They're allies in name but harbour animosity underneath.

Take, for example, the Battle of Shanhai Pass. The Buddhist Kingdoms of the West and the Great Feng were allies, part of the victorious coalition. Meanwhile, the Southern Marches and the Northern tribes were among the defeated.

However, after experiencing that dream of life after death, Xu Qi'an realized that the Battle of Shanhai Pass was far more complex than the historical records made it seem, especially since the Church of the Warlock God of the northeast was also involved.

\*The barbarian tribes of the Southern Marches, the northern barbarians, the Northern Yao Tribe, and the Church of the Warlock God in the northeast... If the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom were involved too, then the defeated side had a truly massive coalition\*.

\*In other words, how powerful was the Great Feng back then? How strong was the Buddhist sect? And just how skilled was Wei Yuan at commanding armies? The more I think about it, the more terrifying it seems.\*

But this alliance wasn't solid. Over the past twenty years, the Northern tribes and the Southern Marches had repeatedly invaded the Great Feng's borders, and despite the court's pleas for help, the Buddhist sect turned a blind eye.

Setting the northern barbarians aside for now, nowadays half of the territory in the Southern Marches had fallen into the hands of the Buddhist sect—the former lands of the Wanyao.

If the Buddhist Kingdoms truly cared about their alliance, they would have directly gone for the enemy crystal. Would the barbarians from the Southern Marches still dare to attack the border?

Of course, the Great Feng wasn't blameless either. Years ago, Cloud Deer Academy spearheaded the campaign to exterminate the Buddhist sect. More recently, when Shenshu broke free, Jianzheng, that cunning old man, pretended to be ill.

\*But their grievance has nothing to do with me. I'm just a humble Silver Gong; it's up to the court officials and Emperor Yuanjing to worry about this. I wonder if the Jianzheng will intervene... That sly old man probably won't.\*

\*As the officer in charge of the Sangpo case, I will most likely have to interact with the Buddhists... To be safe, I should go see the Jianzheng.\*

\*Also, this visit from the emissaries is both a crisis and an opportunity. The Buddhist sect know Shenshu the best. I can use this chance to indirectly probe for more information, which will help me give Shenshu a proper explanation.\*

A bold plan began to take shape in Xu Qi'an's mind.

"Zhong Li, let's go."

Immediately, he donned his Nightwatcher uniform, put on his mink hat, and left the Xu manor.

Riding his ever-reliable little mare, who never got stuck in traffic, he quickly arrived at the Stargazing Tower. He tied up the mare by the steps and climbed the tower alongside Zhong Li.

Just as he finished climbing the stone steps and entered the first-floor hall, a figure in white appeared before him, reciting in a resounding voice:

"Picking the stars with the moon in hand..."

"...there are none like me upon this land." Xu Qi'an interrupted.

... Yang Qianhuan paused for a moment, then resumed his line, his tone leisurely: "Picking the stars with the moon in hand..."

"there are none like me upon this land," Xu Qi'an interrupted again, adding, "Senior Brother Yang, we need to see the Jianzheng. Please don't block our way."

Yang Qianhuan fell silent for a long while before saying, "I'm here for that reason. Teacher sent me to inform you."

Jianzheng already knew I was coming? Xu Qi'an nodded and said, "Please say."

Yang Qianhuan gathered his energy and bellowed, "Piss off!"

...

Xu Qi'an rubbed his ears as he untied the reins of his little mare, muttering, "Does the Sitianjian practice the Buddhist Lion's Roar too? What if I get tinnitus? Will I go deaf?"

As he finished speaking, he saw Zhong Li silently making hand gestures: \_I'm deaf. I need to go back and take my medicine, or my ears will stop working.\_

"..."

Xu Qi'an pointed at his ears, then at himself, as if asking: \_Did I cause this?\_

Zhong Li shook her head (a weary shake, not wanting to argue with Xu Qi'an).

Xu Qi'an nodded in understanding. It seemed this was yet another of Zhong Li's misfortunes, and he was merely caught up in her bad luck.

\*Jianzheng didn't want to meet me, which suggests the cover he put on the heavens is strong enough to deal with the Buddhist monks...\* Having gotten the answer he sought, Xu Qi'an breathed a sigh of relief.

After waiting for a moment downstairs, Zhong Li returned, having taken her medicine.

"Are your ears better?"

Zhong Li nodded. "Mhm."

The two then headed straight for the Nightwatcher Constabulary and went directly to Min Shan's Gold Jade Hall. A burly Silver Gong with a scar across his cheek, Min Shan, looked at them with irritation and said, "Your One Blade Hall has already been repaired. Why are you here again?"

The One Blade Hall was Xu Qi'an's "office," a name he had chosen himself, symbolizing that "no hero in the world can withstand one blade of mine."

"Anything happening in the capital today?" Xu Qi'an asked casually.

"You've heard?"

Min Shan snorted. "The Western Region's emissaries have arrived. They say there's a high monk among them, and for ten miles around, the sky was filled with Buddhist light. Many of the guards on duty at the city gates witnessed it."

"After they entered the city, the commoners went mad, shouting praises of the holy monk. When it comes to manipulating people's hearts, the Buddhist sect has no equal."

\*This must be the ability of a seventh-grade Dharmacarya. I remember reading in the records that a seventh-grade Dharmacarya master can preach and make ordinary people achieve sudden enlightenment, leading them to renounce the world and "pass through the empty door"<sup>[^1]</sup>...\* Xu Qi'an feigned confusion:

"What are the Buddhist emissaries doing in the capital?"

"Who knows?"

Min Shan was unaware of the deeper connection between the Sangpo case and Shenshu, nor did he understand the underlying stakes.

...

A canal boat slowly docked at the docks. On the deck of a three-masted ship stood dozens of Nightwatchers.

Gold Gong Yang Yan and Jiang Lyuzhong led the group off the official ship. As they gazed at the long-lost capital, their hearts swelled with excitement.

Especially for Jiang Lyuzhong and the vanguard led by Governor Zhang—they had been away from the capital for over two months. They had left in the dead of winter, and now, upon their return, willow branches were budding, and new life was sprouting everywhere.

Li Yuchun waved to Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, saying gravely, "After we report to our superiors, let's visit Ningyan's grave."

Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao nodded, their expressions somber.

It had been over a month since Xu Ningyan's death. The tidal wave of grief they felt at the time had now settled into their hearts, leaving them with the memory of a fallen colleague or subordinate, someone they would always remember.

Years later, when they looked back on that young, brash man, they would still feel a faint sadness and regret.

Yang Yan, walking ahead, turned back with a blank expression, though his voice was low and solemn: "I will go too."

Governor Zhang sighed. "I must go see His Majesty, so I won't be joining you. Tomorrow, I will personally visit with my wife and children."

His duties would likely keep him busy tomorrow, so he wouldn't have time to visit Xu Ningyan's grave.

This group had been away since their time in Qingzhou, drifting on the water. They hadn't received any letters from the court, and thus were unaware that Xu Qi'an had already come back to life.

Not only had Xu Qi'an revived, but he had also casually solved a palace murder case.

Soon, they arrived at the Nightwatcher Constabulary.

...



On the way out of the Gold and Jade Hall, Xu Qi'an was preparing to visit his own office when Zhong Li suddenly noticed that he had stopped in his tracks. She glanced at Xu Qi'an before following his gaze to the gate of the Constabulary, where a group of dust-covered Nightwatchers were crossing the threshold... and froze on the spot, as if turned to stone statues.

\*Who is that man, and why does he look so much like Xu Ningyan...\*

\*Do we even have a Bronze Gong like this in our Constabulary...\*

\*Must be seeing things. I swear I just saw Xu Ningyan. But wait, Xu Ningyan wasn't this handsome...\*

\*Are they brothers? But Xu Ningyan didn't have any siblings...\*

One question after another appeared in the minds of the returning Nightwatchers.

There's nothing worse than an awkward silence or the sudden resurfacing of painful memories. Xu Qi'an felt that the lyrics from a certain song perfectly fit the mood right now.

With an awkward yet polite smile, he said, "Hello everyone, my name is Xu Qian."

There was bound to be a reunion eventually, but in Xu Qi'an's mind, the ideal scenario would have been:

Yang Yan and the others would return to the capital and learn from their colleagues in the Constabulary that he had miraculously come back to life. Overwhelmed with joy, they would race over like unleashed wild dogs and hug him while weeping uncontrollably.

This awkward reunion, however, was something he hadn't anticipated.

\*It must be Zhong Li's bad luck rubbing off on me.\*

Li Yuchun stared hard at Xu Qi'an, summoning all his strength before tremblingly asking, "You're Xu Ningyan?"

The others said nothing, merely watching him silently while holding their breath.

"It's me. I didn't die," Xu Qi'an said with a smile.

Upon hearing his confirmation, silence stretched for ten full seconds before Song Tingfeng suddenly let out a loud yell and rushed forward, throwing himself into Xu Qi'an's arms and hugging him tightly.

"How are you not dead? You were definitely stone-cold dead."

"And what's with the change in appearance? How did you come back to life? Tell us everything."

"He's alive, really alive... warm and breathing."

The Nightwatchers surrounded Xu Qi'an, bombarding him with questions, their faces full of excitement.

"I'll explain later, later..." Xu Qi'an pushed them back gently and with a grin pointed at the Silver Gong insignia on his chest, addressing Li Yuchun, "Boss, I'm a Silver Gong now."

Li Yuchun clasped his hands behind his back, maintaining a composed demeanor as he nodded approvingly, "Not bad, all that effort I put into training you wasn't wasted."

Xu Qi'an waved to Zhong Li, calling her over, "Zhong Li, come here. Let me introduce you to my boss."

Only now did Li Yuchun notice Zhong Li... Her hair was dry and messy, her coarse robe covered in wrinkles, and her embroidered shoes clearly hadn't been cleaned in ages. He couldn't even see her face. Li Yuchun felt as though a cold serpent was slithering up his spine, and his scalp tingled inch by inch.

His face twisted in horror, and he retreated a few steps, shouting, "Whose girl is this? Whose girl is this!!!"

Xu Qi'an hurriedly sent her off, "Zhong Li, head over to my One Blade Hall. Just take a right ahead."

"Okay," Zhong Li muttered, head hanging low as she walked away, looking quite aggrieved.

Li Yuchun let out a long breath of relief, the goosebumps on his arms slowly dissipating.

Afterward, Xu Qi'an gave a detailed explanation of how he had come back to life.

"The Pill of Rebirth? The one that allows someone to shed their old body and gain a new one? I heard even His Majesty once requested one from Jianzheng, but Jianzheng wouldn't give it to him... Wait, is Chu Caiwei your lover?" Jiang Lyuzhong exclaimed in amazement.

The Nightwatchers who hadn't known about the Pill of Rebirth were now enlightened after his explanation.

Once the excitement of his colleagues began to settle, Xu Qi'an wrapped an arm around Song Tingfeng's shoulder, "Let's hit the Jiaofangsi for some fun tonight."

To his surprise, Song Tingfeng shook his head, "I won't be going to Jiaofangsi anymore."

He gave Xu Qi'an a stern look, declaring, "I'm not who I used to be. The Song Tingfeng of today is a man of ambition and diligence, focused on his cultivation."

"Ningyan, you've changed, and so have I. You can't look at me with the same eyes as before."

Xu Qi'an scrutinized him in disbelief. It seemed that in the month since his "death," Song Tingfeng had indeed become much more composed and resolute.

Li Yuchun nodded approvingly, "Tingfeng is right. Out of all of us, his growth has been the most significant during this mission to Yunzhou. I'm quite pleased."

Song Tingfeng smiled quietly, full of pride.

Xu Qi'an clapped his hands together and looked around at everyone, "Well, after you all report in, let's gather tonight at Jiaofangsi for drinks. My treat."

Then, he grabbed Zhu Guangxiao by the shoulder, saying, "I still owe you five visits to Jiaofangsi. We even signed a contract."

The rest of his colleagues were thrilled at this.

Song Tingfeng swallowed hard, "Ningyan, my contract's part of it too... Tonight, I'll come to Jiaofangsi."

"You can't go."

Xu Qi'an's face turned serious, and he said righteously, "You're not the same Song Tingfeng anymore. Indulging in debauchery and living recklessly are things Guangxiao and I will handle. You, on the other hand, are a man of ambition and focus now."

...

The Buddhist emissary team stayed at Sanyang station, the largest courier station in the outer city. It was a two-courtyard complex with three ancient willows in the courtyard, from which the station got its name.

A station clerk stepped out from the main gate, glanced around, and quietly slipped into a nearby alley.

In the alley stood a young Nightwatcher, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword, the other fiddling with a piece of silver as he leaned against the wall, waiting.

"Sir, here's the list of emissaries from the Western Regions. The leader is a monk by the name of Du'e."

The clerk handed over a note, his eyes darting to the piece of silver before he spoke again, "Master Du'e has been summoned to the palace and isn't at the station."

"Good job."

Xu Qi'an flicked the silver piece, which arced through the air and was caught skillfully by the clerk, who beamed with gratitude. "Thank you, sir!"

After sending the clerk away, Xu Qi'an quickly shed his Nightwatcher uniform and retrieved a monk's robe from his Earth Book Fragment, slipping it on. He touched his freshly shaved head, gritting his teeth as he comforted himself:

\*It'll grow back.\*

A few minutes later, a handsome monk with an upright bearing strolled out of the alley, his robe swaying gently.

At the station gate, two young monks were on guard duty instead of station clerks.

"This brother, may we know your name?" the monks stepped forward, blocking his way.

Xu Qi'an pressed his palms together and recited a prayer, "Amitabha. This humble monk is Hengyuan from Qinglong Temple. Upon hearing that fellow disciples have come from the Western Regions, I've come to pay my respects."

"Brother Hengyuan from Qinglong Temple...?" The two monks were not easily fooled and scrutinized Xu Qi'an carefully, "But hasn't Brother Hengyuan broken his vows?"

"This humble monk is a martial monk," Xu Qi'an replied, his tone carrying the air of one sharing a sect secret with fellow insiders.

The two monks immediately understood, their attitude becoming much more respectful. "Please, Brother Hengyuan, come inside!"

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Chapter 283. Master, Take Care

Under the guidance of the monks at the gate, Xu Qi'an passed through the front courtyard and entered the inner courtyard.

The young monk stopped in the yard, pressed his palms together in a gesture of respect, and said, "Brother Hengyuan, please wait here for a moment while I notify Sect-Uncle Jingchen."

Xu Qi'an returned the greeting with a Buddhist gesture, saying, "Thank you, Brother."

As the young monk entered a room, Xu Qi'an reflected on the names listed on the roster.

The Western Region emissary had a total of twenty-one members.

The innkeeper had to arrange rooms for the delegation, and since the inn's rooms varied in quality, monks of higher status would naturally get the better rooms. It wouldn't make sense for a novice to stay in a presidential suite while the leading elder was placed in a windowless single room.

Thus, the innkeeper had a clear understanding of each monk's standing.

The most senior monk was, of course, the delegation's leader, "Master Du'e." However, the innkeeper wasn't sure about his exact level of cultivation.

Following him were two monks, "Jingchen" and "Jingsi," who appeared to be fellow disciples, judging by their dharma names.

As for the other monks, their statuses seemed relatively equal.

\*One is called 'Capital City,' and the other 'Nearsighted.'<sup>[^1]</sup> These two disciples sure have interesting names,\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

At that moment, the young monk returned and invited Xu Qi'an inside.

Following the monk into the room, Xu Qi'an noticed the scent of sandalwood in the air. A monk with a round face and plump earlobes sat cross-legged on a mat, smiling at the door.

The monk's aura was restrained, making him seem no different from an ordinary person.

"Senior Brother Jingchen," Xu Qi'an greeted with palms pressed together.

"Junior Brother Hengyuan," the middle-aged monk returned the greeting.

He then gestured for the young monk to serve tea. After Xu Qi'an had taken a sip, the monk finally spoke, "Brother Panshu just returned to the temple."

\*This was an indirect way of saying that the monks from Qinglong Temple had only just learned about the arrival of the delegation in the capital. Brother Panshu had just returned to Qinglong Temple, and unless there were special circumstances, he wouldn't send the monks to pester the delegation...\* Xu Qi'an immediately grasped the implications and realized this was a subtle test.

He had anticipated this and calmly replied, "This poor monk has been away from the temple for many years."

Monk Jingchen smiled and asked, "What brings you here today, Brother Hengyuan?"

His voice carried a strange power, making Xu Qi'an instinctively resist lying. He felt compelled to reveal his true purpose.

\*A fifth-rank Silacarya?\*[<sup>^2</sup>]

Xu Qi'an's heart skipped a beat.

The abbot of Qinglong Temple, Panshu, was also a fifth rank. Monks at this level were like walking "rules"; they would consciously or unconsciously influence those around them.

A monk does not lie, a monk must be abstinent, a monk must not kill, etc, etc... having already restricted themselves under such rules for so long, a Silacarya could consciously or unconsciously influence those around them.

Xu Qi'an had never witnessed a Silacarya in battle, but when he investigated the Sangpo case at Qinglong Temple, he had specifically studied the profiles of Buddhist experts.

Silacaryas' combat prowess stemmed entirely from their adherence to monastic discipline, somewhat resembling the Confucians' "Laws follow commandments," though not as flexible.

In simple terms, a Confucian might declare, "Xu Qi'an's Diao Chan is riding his waist!"—and this could actually materialise, though with serious side effects for the caster.<sup>[3]</sup>

In contrast, a Buddhist Silacarya might declare, "Xu Qi'an, reverse smoking is a scorn to God!"<sup>[4]</sup>—which would only result in his lips being burnt, without much other consequence.

Confucians could alter reality through their words, whereas Silacaryas made others follow preexisting rules, making the two fundamentally different.

Xu Qi'an pressed his palms together and recited a Buddhist prayer: "Brother, have you and your fellow disciples come to the capital because of the sealed object from the Sangpo case?"

His words were like a boulder thrown into a calm lake.

Monk Jingchen narrowed his eyes but remained composed, smiling as he asked, "Did Brother Panshu tell you this?"

Before Panshu had returned to Qinglong Temple, Master Du'e had strictly instructed everyone not to reveal the existence of the sealed object, even to the monks of Qinglong Temple.

Master Jingchen was trying to set a trap.

Xu Qi'an shook his head and sighed, "It wasn't my master. To be honest, I also played a part in the Sangpo case..."

A golden gleam seemed to flash through Monk Jingchen's serene eyes.

"I have a junior brother, his dharma name is Henghui. We grew up together, deeply bonded. Over a year ago, Henghui suddenly disappeared and stole a spell from the temple that conceals one's aura. After much investigation, I discovered he had likely been abducted by a criminal network..."

Xu Qi'an adopted a sorrowful expression, as if overwhelmed by grief, and had to recite a Buddhist prayer to soothe his emotions: "Amitabha."

Monk Jingchen, engrossed in the story, noticed Hengyuan's sadness and felt moved. "Is there more to this case?"

"Indeed, Brother Henghui fell in love with a female devotee, and they made a private commitment to each other. Thus, he stole the temple's artefact and fled with her."

Jingchen frowned, puzzled. "Even if they eloped, why would he need to steal the artifact?"

Xu Hengyuan sighed and explained, "The woman was the daughter of King Yu. King Yu is the emperor's brother, a noble king. Without the artifact to conceal their auras, they could never have escaped the capital."

\*This...\* Monk Jingchen was at a loss for words, unable to refute the reasoning.

Xu Qi'an then briefly recounted how the two naive young lovers were deceived, dragged into court politics, and ultimately met tragic ends.

"Amitabha!" Monk Jingchen pressed his palms together, his face showing compassion as he recited the Buddhist prayer.

After a few moments of silence, he asked, "But how does this relate to the Sangpo case?"

Good question! Xu Qi'an smirked inwardly but maintained his composed expression, answering, "This case is far more complicated than it appears on the surface... At the end of last year, the Yongzhen Shanhe temple in the Sangpo Lake was suddenly destroyed in an explosion, and the evil entity sealed beneath the lake was released.

"The emperor was furious and ordered the three judicial offices to investigate thoroughly. I became involved because that evil entity took refuge in my junior brother, Henghui."

"What?!"

Master Jingchen's face changed dramatically, and he hurriedly asked, "Where is the evil creature now? Is Henghui still alive? How did Great Feng handle this? Did the Jianzheng not intervene? Or has the evil been sealed again by the Jianzheng?"

He bombarded Xu Qi'an with a barrage of questions, completely losing the serene demeanor of a monk.

"Brother Jingchen, don't rush, allow me to explain slowly..."

Xu Qi'an began to explain the intricate details of the Sangpo case and the Pingyang Princess case, carefully dissecting their connection and the secrets entwined within, revealing everything to Master Jingchen.

Master Jingchen remained silent for a long time, seemingly overwhelmed by the complex and interwoven nature of the cases.

These hidden truths were unknown even to Abbot Panshu, who had merely journeyed west to inform the Buddhist sect of the Sangpo seal's breach.

\*His uncle had gone to the palace to meet the emperor and understand the details, yet I, who stayed behind at the relay station, am now the first to know the entire story...\* Jingchen sighed deeply:

"This case is indeed complicated and strange, and the person who unravelled it even more remarkable. How did Brother Hengyuan come to know such detailed information?"

Xu Qi'an knew that this was a question bound to arise. He remained calm, forcing himself to fight the instinct not to lie, and replied:

“Though the case was officially handled by the Three Judicial Offices, the one who truly uncovered the Sangpo case and the Pingyang Princess case was a Silver Gong from the Nightwatchers named Xu Qi’an. I share a deep friendship with Sir Xu and was drawn into the case due to Henghui, which is how I came to know it so well.”

\*Silver Gong Xu Qi’an...\* Jingchen committed the name to memory and quickly inquired, “Who exactly is this Silver Gong Xu, Brother Hengyuan? Tell me more about him.”

"Ah!"

Hengyuan did not speak at once but let out a long sigh.

“Brother, why this sigh?”

"I was just thinking of Xu Qi’an, and I am filled with deep emotions."

“Oh? What do you mean?”

Hengyuan said slowly, “Brother, you don’t know, but Xu Qi’an is the most extraordinarily gifted person I have ever encountered. In the way of cultivation, he possesses peerless talent, unmatched by almost anyone in Great Feng.

“In matters of justice, he refuses to take anything from the people, dedicating himself solely to upholding righteousness.

“In solving cases, despite Great Feng being full of experts, none can match him.

“As for poetry, he is hailed as the greatest poet of the past two centuries in Great Feng. It’s said that the oiran of Jiaofangsi are madly in love with him, yet he remains indifferent.”

Master Jingchen was dumbfounded, never expecting that such a person existed in the capital.

“Does such a person really exist in this world? It’s a pity he hasn’t entered our Buddhist sect,” Jingchen remarked, a sharp glint flashing in his eyes.

\*... Damn it, I’ve overdone it! Is this guy trying to convert me to Buddhism? What do I need this iron rod for then?\*

Xu Qi’an, now on high alert, casually shifted the conversation and made his intentions clear: “The reason I’ve come to you, Brother, is to inquire about the nature of the evil sealed beneath Sangpo.

"I know it’s connected to our Buddhist House, but I can’t understand why it had to be sealed under Sangpo in the Great Feng."

"This..." Jingchen's face showed hesitation.

"Brother, is there something you can't say?" Hengyuan asked directly.

“This matter is a Buddhist secret, Brother. It’s best not to ask further,” Jingchen responded.

"Hah!"

Hengyuan sneered, "I see now. I thought of the Western Buddhist sect as family, but in the eyes of my fellow disciples, I'm just an outsider.

"Fine, fine, it was my mistake for thinking otherwise. I'll take my leave. The Western Buddhist sect is the Western Buddhist sect; Qinglong Temple is Qinglong Temple—different entities."

With that, he got up to leave.

"Stop!"

Jingchen called out, his face showing a trace of anger, "We are all disciples of the Buddha, worshipping the same Buddha. We are one family. Brother, your words earlier attack the heart. Don't say such things again."

\*There's a chance...\* Hengyuan remained expressionless but inwardly smirked as he gave a cold grunt.

That grunt was infused with the Buddhist "Lion's Roar," causing the sound to reverberate through the room.

\*Warrior Monks' tempers have always been this fiery...\* Jingchen sighed in his heart and gestured for him to sit. "Please, Brother. I will share with you what I know."

Qinglong Temple was the last remnant of the Western Buddhist sect in the Great Feng. If the Western sect wished to continue spreading its teachings in the Central Plains, Qinglong Temple was an indispensable force.

Given this context, the Western Buddhist sect highly valued its "family" relationship with Qinglong Temple, and any rift must be mended and avoided.

"That evil creature is indeed connected to our sect. According to Master Du'e, it was a traitor of the Buddhist sect."

"A traitor of the Buddhist sect?"

\*As I expected. Shenshu was a buddhist, yet sealed by the buddhists. If not a traitor, what else could he be?\*

"Who was this traitor?" Hengyuan asked.

"That I do not know," Master Jingchen shook his head. "This is a closely guarded Buddhist secret. Even I am not privy to such details."

\*I wish I could use the Qi-watching technique to see if he's lying... It's Shenshu, the traitor monk's name was Shenshu...\* Hengyuan pressed further:

"Why was he sealed instead of being put to rest?"

\*Buddhism speaks of mercy, but surely they wouldn't be so lenient with a traitor?\*

"When Abbot Panshu relayed the news back to the West, the arhats and bodhisattvas took it very seriously, communicating through thunderous proclamations. This level



of formality hasn't been seen since the battle at Shanhai Pass twenty years ago." Jingchen pondered for a moment and added:

"Along the way, I overheard Master Du'e mention that the demon monk cannot be killed."

\*Cannot be killed?!\*

This passage contained a wealth of information that forced Xu Qi'an to pause his inquiries and reflect deeply.

\*So, Shenshu was sealed in Sangpo not because the Buddhist sect showed mercy, but because they couldn't kill him.\*

\*Shenshu had once said that he had miraculously entered the highest realm of "immortality."\*

\*But let's not forget, Buddhism has the existence of the Buddha, a being beyond the nine ranks. Could even the Buddha not kill Shenshu?\*

\*My goodness, Shenshu is even more terrifying than I imagined. What kind of monster is he...?\*

Xu Qi'an muttered inwardly.

\*Could it be that he could easily take out the old Jianzheng with a single punch?\*

"I see, so it's because he can't be killed. No wonder they had to dismember and seal him," Xu Qi'an said in a deep voice.

"But why was Sangpo chosen for the seal?" he asked again.

Sealing such a dangerous traitor, a dire threat, within the ally state of the Great Feng's borders surely must have been due to some unavoidable reason. Otherwise, sealing him within their own domain would have been more secure.

"This question also puzzled me, and I asked Uncle Du'e about it on our journey. He told me that it stemmed from an agreement made 500 years ago with the the Great Feng's Emperor Wuzong," Jingchen explained.

\*An agreement from 500 years ago... During that time, Buddhism was spreading across the Great Feng, with temples springing up everywhere. So there was indeed a hidden truth behind this. But most of the records from 500 years ago had either been destroyed, altered, or concealed.\*

\*Well damn, there's no way to investigate further.\*

After a bit more conversation, Xu Qi'an confirmed that he couldn't extract any more information, so he stood up to take his leave.

Monk Jingchen personally escorted him out. As soon as they exited the room, they saw a handsome monk walking down the corridor toward them.

"Senior Brother!" the handsome monk pressed his palms together in greeting.

Jingchen returned the gesture and introduced him, "This is Senior Brother Hengyuan from Qinglong Temple. Address him as Senior Brother."

Then, introducing the younger monk to Xu Hengyuan, Jingchen said, "This is Junior Brother Jingsi."

\*"Nearsighted" is so young?\* Xu Hengyuan was a little surprised.

"Senior Brother Hengyuan." The handsome monk bowed.

Xu Qi'an returned the greeting and then said to Jingchen, "Senior Brother, there's no need to see me off."

As he watched Xu Qi'an's figure disappear into the distance, Jingsi lingered in thought, his gaze following for a long while.

"What's on your mind, Junior Brother?" Jingchen asked.

"For some reason, I feel that he has an aura that draws people closer," Jingsi said.

...

Xu Qi'an left the courier station, walking quickly along the street.

\*Though I still don't know Monk Shenshu's identity, I've at least confirmed a few things: First, he is indeed a Buddhist traitor—this is undeniable. Second, his cultivation level is far higher than I anticipated—so high that even the Buddha couldn't kill him, though there's no evidence that the Buddha tried... I'll assume that for now.\*

\*Third, I'm only responsible for helping him uncover his identity and recover his memory. As for his enmity with the Buddhist sect, I won't get involved, not unless I become a Martial God—but that's impossible.\*

\*Fourth, I must cling to this major opportunity and extract as many benefits as I can.\*

\*Fifth, the existence of Shenshu must not be revealed to anyone, not even Wei Yuan. This matter is too great.\*

\*Sixth, since it's still early, I should visit the Goulun for some music.\*

Suddenly, Xu Qi'an spotted a familiar figure among the crowd ahead.

It was a burly and tall monk, his chin sporting a bluish-black stubble, as if he had just shaved.

The loose monk robes he wore seemed to fit perfectly, concealing the muscles beneath.

\*Fuck, Hengyuan!!\*

A thousand fucks ran through Xu Qi'an's mind.

Master Hengyuan also spotted him and, despite his surprise, couldn't help but feel puzzled by Xu Qi'an's attire.

"Sir Xu, why are you dressed like this?"

"Performance art..." Xu Qi'an maintained a straight face.

"?"

"Are you on your way to the Sanyang Post Station?"

"My fellow disciples have arrived, so I must go see them."

"Could... could you not see them?" Xu Qi'an forced a smile, trying not to let his facial muscles twitch.

"Why?" Hengyuan was baffled.

\*Because you might end up getting beaten up...\* Xu Qi'an chuckled dryly and shook his head.

Hengyuan looked at him a few more times and then nodded. "I just came from the Xu residence after having a meal."

\*Huh? You went to my house? Oh, you went to congratulate Erlang on passing the national exam, didn't you? And he didn't kick you out?\*

Xu Qi'an suddenly felt a deep sense of guilt, realizing he had set up both his little brother and the kind-hearted Master Hengyuan, truly feeling unworthy.

He vowed to become a better person.

"Master..."

Xu Qi'an pulled out a ten-tael banknote from his sleeve and sincerely handed it to Master Hengyuan. "This is my contribution to the elderly and children at the Welfare Home."

If it were for himself, Hengyuan would not accept it, but knowing it was meant to help the elderly and orphans, the kind-hearted Master Hengyuan couldn't refuse.

"Amitabha, Sir Xu is truly a great benefactor," Hengyuan said, full of admiration.

"It's what I should do, it's what I should do..."

Xu Qi'an waved goodbye, walked a few steps, and then couldn't resist calling out, "Master!"

Hengyuan stopped and turned back, "Sir Xu, do you have more to say?"

"...Take care!"

...

Xu Qi'an found a secluded alley, changed back into his Nightwatcher uniform, and, familiar with the route, entered a Goulan.

"Sir, are you here for a room or a meal?" a servant in green greeted him.

"Get your most beautiful girl to come and give me a massage," Xu Qi'an went straight to the second floor.

The private rooms on the second floor were reserved for VIPs, where those with standing would come to enjoy music and performances.

Meanwhile, Master Hengyuan arrived at the gate of the station.

The gatekeepers exchanged glances, wondering if Buddhism had flourished so greatly in the Great Feng.

"Which temple does this Senior Brother practice at?"

Filled with doubt, one of the gatekeepers stopped Hengyuan.

Master Hengyuan pressed his palms together, "I am Hengyuan of Qinglong Temple. I heard that my fellow disciples have arrived in the capital, so I came to pay my respects."

After he spoke, he keenly noticed that the two gatekeepers' eyes widened, as if they had seen a ghost.

"Is something wrong?" Hengyuan asked, puzzled.

"Heh heh, nothing is wrong. Senior Brother, please wait here while I go inform them." The gatekeeper gave Hengyuan a deep look before turning inside.

Moments later, he returned, expressionless. "Please, come in."

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#### Chapter 284. Question and Answer

Hengyuan frowned, sensing something was amiss. Ever since he introduced himself, the expressions of the two gatekeeper monks had been strange. After delivering the message, there was an unspoken hostility.

"Please lead the way!" Hengyuan said humbly, lowering his eyes.

Under the lead of the monks at the gate, they passed through the front courtyard and main building, arriving at the rear courtyard.

Under the eaves, standing in the corridor, was a middle-aged monk. He wore the rough attire of a wandering monk, his face was round, and his earlobes thick. He looked expressionless as he scrutinised Hengyuan.

"Are you Hengyuan from Qinglong Temple?" Monk Jingchen's sharp gaze examined Hengyuan.

"Yes, that is this poor monk," Hengyuan responded.

Hengyuan was also observing Jingchen. By this point, he had already realised that the group of monks from the Western Region held some undefined hostility toward him.

Hengyuan had no idea where this hostility came from, as they had never had any contact before.

"A monk does not lie!" Monk Jingchen said sternly.

Upon hearing these words, Hengyuan's immediate instinct was a warning bell ringing in his ears. He couldn't lie and had to answer honestly.

"Yes, that is me." Hengyuan clasped his hands together and replied calmly.

Monk Jingchen fell silent. He had just used the power of the Silacarya, confirming that this monk who claimed to be Hengyuan wasn't lying. Unless the other party was also a Silacarya who could alter monastic precepts himself, he couldn't have lied.

The question now was, if this person was indeed Hengyuan, who was the other monk earlier?

What was their purpose?

Jingchen carefully reviewed the conversation, suddenly realising with alarm that the earlier monk had come for the sealed object at Sangpo.

If that was the case, the nature of this matter was far more serious than simply someone impersonating Hengyuan. It involved the demon monk, and he needed to handle this with great caution.

"The monk earlier also knew the Buddhist Lion's Roar. Even if he isn't Hengyuan, he must be a Buddhist... But even if this one before me is truly Hengyuan, is he really here just for a visit with no other intentions?"

With these thoughts flashing through his mind, Monk Jingchen made a decisive move. Pointing at Hengyuan, he shouted, "Seize him!"

Immediately, two monks dressed in azure \*kasaya\* robes stepped forward, pressing down on Hengyuan's shoulders.

Bang!

Hengyuan's Qi surged, easily sending the two monks flying.

In the corridor, Monk Jingchen clasped his hands together in a seal, chanting, "The body cannot move, the hands cannot shift, the mouth cannot speak."

As his voice fell, golden ripples, gentle yet firm, spread from his hand seal and swept over Hengyuan.

In an instant, Hengyuan seemed trapped in a mire. Though his mind remained sharp, his body had completely lost its ability to move.

\_Boom, boom, boom...\_

Around Hengyuan, waves of air erupted, like tiny explosions of fireworks. He was trying to resist the precepts with brute force, attempting to break free from the trap.

Jingchen frowned, realising that this monk claiming to be Hengyuan was far stronger than he had anticipated. He shouted urgently, "Capture him now!"

More monks rushed out of the rooms, including warrior monks, dharmacarya, and dhyana-carya. The latter two had limited combat abilities, leaving it to the warrior monks to handle the physical confrontation.

However, before they could encircle him, Hengyuan broke free from the effect of the receipts and moved with lightning speed, leaving an afterimage as he charged at Monk Jingchen.

Hengyuan was furious and intended to teach this Western sect brother a lesson.

At that moment, a figure stepped in front of Jingchen. It was a young, handsome monk in azure robes—Monk Jingsi.

With a calm expression, Jingsi looked at the approaching Hengyuan and struck out with his palm.

The moment the palm was thrust, there was nothing unusual, but during the movement, a mote of golden lacquer spread from his palm, quickly covering his hand and arm. In an instant, Jingsi looked like a golden statue.

\_Clang!\_

Jingsi's palm landed squarely on Hengyuan's chest. Hengyuan, as if struck by a battering ram, was sent flying, smashing through the courtyard wall and crashing into the main building's walls.

The station's staff were terrified, trembling and hiding in their rooms, not daring to come out. These monks had just moved in, and they were already fighting someone. If this continued, wouldn't they tear the place down?

\_Cough, cough...\_

Amidst pained coughing, Hengyuan emerged, staring at Jingsi without saying a word.

Jingchen said indifferently, "You will stay in the station. When Uncle Du'e returns, he will have questions for you."

Hengyuan nodded. "Very well."

Just as the word "well" was uttered, Hengyuan once again became an afterimage, charging fiercely—this time, not at Jingchen, but at Jingsi.

The golden-hued Jingsi raised his palm again to strike Hengyuan, but this time Hengyuan intercepted his arm, and his fist, as large as a clay pot, hammered repeatedly at Jingsi's face, producing a resounding "clang, clang, clang."

Staggered by the blows, Jingsi responded with a headbutt, forcing Hengyuan back. The two exchanged more than a dozen rapid blows before Hengyuan once again gained the upper hand.

Grabbing Jingsi's wrist, Hengyuan roared and performed an over-the-shoulder throw, smashing Jingsi into the ground.

\_Boom!\_

The flagstones in the courtyard erupted, launching into the air, as the ground cracked open.

Hengyuan knelt, pressing his knee against Jingsi's throat, and began pummeling his head with a flurry of punches.

\_Clang, clang, clang...\_

The sounds echoed like temple bells, accompanied by gusts of air, wreaking havoc across the courtyard. Tiles shattered, flowerbeds exploded, and willow trees snapped—chaos ensued.

Jingsi, unable to resist, could only cover his face and endure the relentless beating.

"That's enough!" Jingchen commanded.

Only then did Hengyuan stop, shaking off his bloodied fist and glaring coldly at Jingsi. "Thick skin, that's all."

Finally, the warrior monk's fiery temper had subsided.

Xu Qi'an had always misunderstood Hengyuan, thinking he was a simple and gentle "Lu Zhishen," when in fact, Hengyuan was a brute wrapped in a gentle and honest exterior.

Only someone with a fierce temper could storm into the Pingyuan Earl's mansion at night, kill everyone inside, and walk away without a care in the world.

However, in Hengyuan's mind, Sir Xu was a kind and charitable man—a good person who deserved to be treated with gentleness.

After entering the station, Hengyuan had faced hostility at every turn. He had come with goodwill, only to be met with aggression. His anger had been simmering, and this young monk had dared to act superior, as if Hengyuan were a mere weakling.

But in the end, Jingsi was just a monk with thick skin.

...

Just past three PM, the early spring sun hung lazily in the western sky.

Master Du'e, holding a monk's staff and draped in a gold and red kasaya, strolled leisurely back to the courier station. He paused for a moment at the entrance before stepping inside and making his way to the inner courtyard.

The courtyard was a mess. The station workers were on ladders, laying roof tiles, while the warrior monks were tamping down the cracked ground with soil. Among them, the most industrious one was an unfamiliar bald man. Master Du'e glanced at him a few times but said nothing.

Master Du'e was a gaunt old monk with dark skin, a face full of wrinkles, and a body so withered that he looked comical wrapped in his oversized kasaya.

"Senior Uncle!"

Monk Jingchen came out of the house and began speaking in the language of the Western Regions: "While you were in the palace, something happened..."

He detailed the entire incident involving the two versions of Hengyuan.

"Hengyuan beat Jingsi without giving him a chance to fight back?"

Master Du'e glanced at Hengyuan, who was still working hard.

"Yes," Jingchen nodded, then added, "But Junior Brother Jingsi wasn't hurt. The Vajra Sutra<sup>[1]</sup> isn't something just anyone can break through."

There was a hint of pride in his voice.

Master Du'e didn't comment on that, instead asking, "Did the first Hengyuan reveal any information about the evil object? For instance, did he know anything specific about it or its origins?"

Jingchen thought for a moment and shook his head. "He only mentioned that the sealed object under Sangpo was related to the Buddhist sect and, when discussing the case, said he had seen the severed hand possess Junior Brother Henghui.

"Uncle, this matter can be easily verified by questioning the Hengyuan outside."

But Master Du'e asked again, "He truly didn't reveal anything about the evil object to try and coax you into giving more details?"

Jingchen shook his head again. "No."

Master Du'e hummed in acknowledgment. "I know who he is now. Go to the Nightwatcher Constabulary and find that officer, Xu Qi'an. I have something to ask him."

...

Xu Qi'an emerged from the Goulan brothel feeling light as a feather, his bones practically melting from relaxation. A massage while watching performances and listening to music—it was a life of pure bliss.

In just one hour, the goulans' girls had come and gone in waves, entering with bright smiles and leaving with trembling hands.

\*Too bad the girls here specialise in something else and aren't professional masseuses. Their skills could use some work. This era has brothels, the Jiaofangsi, and entertainment districts, but no foot spas or massage parlors. What a shame.\*

By this time, his shift was long over. There was no need to return to the constabulary, so Xu Qi'an hired a carriage to head back to Xu Manor.

"You're finally home, Dalang! Someone from the constabulary has been waiting for you here for quite a while. They've already had two pots of tea," Old Zhang, the gatekeeper, greeted him hurriedly.

\*The constabulary is looking for me?\* Xu Qi'an thought for a moment, guessing it must be someone from the Western Buddhist sect.

When he entered the reception hall, he saw a black-clad clerk sitting on a chair, sipping tea while glancing frequently outside.

"Ah, Sir Xu! You're finally back!"

After countless glances, the clerk was overjoyed to see Xu Qi'an. "If you'd come back any later, I'd have been forced to stay overnight at your manor after the curfew."

"What's the matter?" Xu Qi'an got straight to the point.

"A high monk from the Buddhist sect came to the constabulary looking for you not long ago. Since you weren't there, they went to see Duke Wei. Duke Wei sent me to wait for you here," the officer said.

\*It's just a monk—does Wei Yuan really need to treat this so seriously? These Westerners aren't a big deal. When will my Central Plains stand tall again?\* Xu Qi'an clenched his teeth in frustration but kept his expression blank. "Understood, I'll go see him shortly."

The Nightwatchers clerk sighed in relief, ready to take his leave. Suddenly, he remembered something and smiled. "By the way, Duke Wei heard you've been out gallivanting lately instead of ready at the constabulary or patrolling the streets. He's quite angry and said your salary for the next three months is gone."

\*...Dad, we can talk about this!\* Xu Qi'an's face stiffened.

After seeing the clerk off, Xu Qi'an remembered that his horse was still at the Nightwatcher Constabulary, so he instructed a servant to fetch Xu Erlang's horse for him.

The Xu Manor had three horses—one each for Xu Pingzhi, Xu Qi'an, and Xu Xinnian. There was also a carriage for the women of the household.



Xu Xinnian, having heard his older brother had returned, rushed out of his study with a worried look. "Elder Brother, after you left today, those two shady characters came again."

"What?" Xu Qi'an was confused for a moment.

"A swordsman in azure robes and a monk who looks more like a butcher. They showed up uninvited to congratulate us. Father said guests should be treated kindly, so he invited them in for wine."

Xu Xinnian frowned. "I couldn't help but feel the way they looked at me was strange."

Xu Qi'an suddenly recalled that Hengyuan had mentioned earlier he had just come from the Xu Manor after a drink.

"Erlang, don't bother with such nobodies. You're the huiyuan now—your vision should be set on greater heights." Xu Qi'an wasn't quite sure how to comfort his little brother, so he patted him on the shoulder. "I need to borrow your horse for a bit. I'll bring it back tomorrow."

Just then, a servant led the horse to the front gate. Xu Qi'an mounted up and left swiftly.

By the time he arrived at Sanyang Station, the sun was already setting, casting a magnificent red-gold glow across the horizon.

"You..."

The two monks guarding the gate felt deceived. They glared at Xu Qi'an with open hostility.

"I'm Xu Qi'an, the officer in charge of the Sangpo case. Master Du'e summoned me. Lead the way." Xu Qi'an smiled as he handed over the reins.

Suppressing their anger, one monk took the reins, while the other gestured for him to enter.

Following the gatekeepers, Xu Qi'an was led into the inner courtyard.

\*Looks like there was a fight here... and Hengyuan's here working. I'm so sorry Master Hengyuan, I promise, I'll be a good person from now on.\*

He lowered his head in shame, not daring to look at Hengyuan. Under the guidance of the monks, he entered a room. There were three monks in that room, the one in the centre sat on the armchair was a dark-skinned old monk, with a face full of wrinkles, and a body so thin that it looked comical under his oversized kasaya.

Left and right of him were Jingchen and Jingsi, all familiar faces.

Jingchen looked at Xu Qi'an with an unfriendly gaze.

"Master Du'e!" Xu Qi'an clasped his hands together in the buddhist style, and bade his regards.

The old monk bowed back, and said warmly: "Sir Xu, why did you impersonate Hengyuan, a monk from Qinglong Temple?"

Xu Qi'an replied with utmost sincerity: "I wanted to find out what was sealed under Sangpo Lake."

The old monk narrowed his eyes, silently watching him. His calm, gentle gaze seemed to penetrate deeply, as if he were scanning Xu's inner being.

In front of this monk, Xu Qi'an dared not let his thoughts run wild. He calmed his mind and spoke again:

"The Sangpo case was one that I personally investigated. I discovered many secrets, including that the Yongzhen Shanhe Temple was built upon a great formation, and something evil was sealed within it. After the explosion at the temple, the evil escaped. I personally dove into the lake to investigate and found that the remaining pillars of the formation had Buddhist inscriptions.

"At first, I thought the thing sealed under Sangpo was the former Jianzheng, but as the case progressed and Henghui appeared, I realised the thing sealed was a severed hand."

"I deduced that the severed hand was related to the Buddhist House. However, neither the Jianzheng nor the royal family were willing to speak openly about this matter.

"I, Xu Qi'an, have solved many major cases in the capital, and there is no mystery I cannot uncover. But this matter has become a thorn in my side, keeping me awake at night."

Master Du'e slowly nodded. "So that was the reason for your earlier test?"

"Exactly," Xu Qi'an replied.

This explanation was something he had prepared when impersonating Hengyuan. He portrayed himself as a 'madman' obsessed with solving the mystery, losing sleep over the severed hand's origins and the secrets behind it. That's why he pretended to be Hengyuan when the Western Buddhist delegation arrived.

His actions made sense — all of his inquiries were cautiously phrased, never revealing any information about the monk Shenshu, portraying himself as a lead investigator who only knew half of the story.

Master Du'e smiled gently. "Do you wish to know more about the evil creature?"

Xu Qi'an's heart leaped with joy, and he allowed a hint of curiosity to show. "Would the master be willing to tell me?"

The emaciated monk smiled. "I could, but only if you join our Buddhist order and become my disciple."

\*Get lost...\* Xu Qi'an's face twitched slightly as he shook his head. "This official is a martial artist, and so cannot follow the Buddhist heart."

Master Du'e seemed to have anticipated this response. He said calmly, "You could become a warrior monk."

\*A warrior monk... So my guess was correct,\* thought Xu Qi'an. The Buddhist sect's warrior monk system was designed for 'outer disciples,' confirming his long-held suspicion.

What is the next rank after an eighth-rank warrior monk?

“Can warrior monks marry and have children?” Xu asked.

“Though warrior monks are not bound by the precepts, they cannot marry or have children. It’s not a matter of cultivation but a rule of the Buddhist order,” Master Du’e replied, shaking his head. “Once you enter the Buddhist path, you are considered a monk, and no monk may start a family.”

Xu Qi’an put on a look of regret. “I greatly admire the Buddhist path, but alas, I am the only heir in my family for nine generations... It seems I have no fate with Buddhism. What a great regret.”

Master Du’e was visibly pleased, not expecting Xu Qi’an to show such friendliness toward Buddhism.

“If Sir Xu ever has any questions, feel free to visit the station and ask. I will tell you what I can. There is no need to disguise yourself as a Buddhist monk.”

“This official apologises for his previous transgression.” Xu Qi’an said.

Master Du’e nodded and instructed Jingsi to see him out.

Once Jingsi had returned after escorting Xu Qi’an out, Master Du’e said gravely, “Summon Hengyuan.”

“Yes!” Jing Chen went outside to fetch him.

Before long, Hengyuan, covered in dust, returned with Jing Chen. Master Du’e smiled and said, “Panshu calls me uncle, so you, as his disciple, may call me grand-uncle.”

In truth, there was no hierarchical connection between the Western Buddhist order and Qinglong Temple, but out of courtesy, Jing Chen had earlier referred to Xu as a junior brother.

“Grand-Uncle,” Hengyuan greeted, clasping his hands together.

Master Du’e nodded and asked, “I heard from Jing Chen that the Silver Gong, Xu Qi’an, claimed to be close friends with you?”

Hengyuan replied, “Yes.”

“And despite the misunderstandings caused by this man, you bear no grudge against him?” Master Du’e asked, fixing Hengyuan with a penetrating gaze.

“No matter what Sir Xu does, this disciple can always forgive and understand him,” Hengyuan replied.

He owed Number Three two lives and Xu Qi’an one life — a great debt of gratitude.

Master Du’e nodded again. “What kind of man is he?”

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Chapter 285. Unbreakable Diamond

Hengyuan pondered for a moment and said, "I met Sir Xu during the Sangpo case. At that time, my junior brother Henghui was involved in the case, and the Golden Gongs of the Nightwatchers had surrounded the place where we were hiding.

"I thought that even if I escaped death, I would be imprisoned. Unexpectedly, Sir Xu, as the official in charge, after finding out that I was implicated and not a co-conspirator with Henghui, immediately released me."

Here, Hengyuan made some modifications, concealing how Xu Qi'an had tricked him... Of course, Hengyuan still doesn't know Xu Qi'an tricked him.

"He's not a bad person after all!" Monk Jingchen snorted coldly.

But also a shameless one. Earlier, when asked what kind of person Xu Qi'an was, Monk Jingchen remembered how shameless Xu Qi'an was in his self-praise, to the point that even Monk Jingchen felt embarrassed for him, yet Xu Qi'an spoke so confidently.

\*It's not about being good or bad... how to put it, he has an indescribable personal charm..\*.  
Hengyuan continued:

"After I left Qinglong Temple, I stayed at a welfare hall in the southern part of the city, which shelters a group of homeless elderly and children. When Sir Xu found out, he generously gave money, frequently sending silver to help them.

"To know, his monthly salary was only five taels of silver, and at that time, he was just a Bronze Gong. Yet, he never complained and even comforted me, saying that the silver was just picked up off the ground.

"Heh, I've secretly investigated him. Unlike other Nightwatchers, he never used his power for personal gain or exploited the common people. That silver, it was saved through his own frugality."

Hearing this, Monk Jingchen fell silent.

He remembered Xu Qi'an's boastful words, claiming he'd never taken even a needle or thread from the common people.

Master Du'e remained indifferent, saying calmly, "Doing good deeds doesn't necessarily make one a good person. People have many faces."

Hengyuan frowned slightly, feeling displeased, and continued, "Then let me tell you another story, Senior Uncle. Before the Sangpo case, he once almost beheaded a superior who was trying to defile a young girl he didn't even know. Because of this, he was imprisoned and sentenced to be executed by chopping at the waist.

"If not for the destruction of the Yongzhen Shanhe Temple at that time, and the court urgently needing manpower, he would already be dead."

Master Du'e pondered for a long time and then asked, "What special qualities does he have?"

\*Special qualities...\* Hengyuan carefully considered his response: "Other than his extraordinary talent in martial arts, he has no particularly special traits."

Master Du'e seemed a bit disappointed, nodding slightly, "You may go about your business."

Hengyuan pressed his hands together and left the room.

"Senior Uncle, Hengyuan didn't lie. It seems that Xu Qi'an is indeed a good man, although his way of doing things can be rather hateful," Monk Jingchen said.

Whether as an official or a person, that Xu Qi'an was a man of good character. Although he had his moments that made him extremely unlikeable, it didn't diminish his integrity.

Master Du'e hummed in agreement.

The handsome Monk Jingsi immediately asked, "Then could he still be involved with the demonic creature?"

Master Du'e shook his head and said in a deep voice, "The mastermind behind this case is a remnant of the Wanyao Kingdom, as well as Emperor Yuanjing and the Jianzheng. The former only half-heartedly acts, while the latter watches coldly. It has little to do with that Silver Gong. Since he is a good man, we need not make things difficult for him."

Jingchen snorted, "The Feng Dynasty is untrustworthy and has repeatedly broken its promises. Why should we ally with them? I don't understand what the Arhats and Bodhisattvas are thinking."

As one of the Arhats, Master Du'e glanced at his junior disciple and said slowly, "The northern barbarians have the bloodline of the demon gods, and have been allied with the northern yao clan for thousands of years.

"The southern barbarian tribes are numerous, and the seven strongest shaman tribes are also considered descendants of the demon gods. In the northeast, the Church of the Warlock God has a Warlock Deity who has surpassed the nine ranks.

"If we want the Buddha's light to shine throughout the land of Jiuzhou, we can only ally with the Great Feng."

\*Only ally with the Great Feng...\* Jingchen and Jingsi extracted a crucial piece of information from their master's words:

The reason the Buddhist Sect is allied with Great Feng is that Great Feng has no beyond-rank beings, and is not entangled with the ancient gods and demons.

Of course, thousands of years ago, there was a Confucian sage in the Central Plains who surpassed first rank. But back then, there was no Great Feng.

Returning to his thoughts, Jingchen tentatively asked, "What should we do next? Should we continue to track the demonic creature? Should we just let things go with the Feng?"

Master Du'e smiled mysteriously and said, "I've heard that due to the Daoist conflict between Heaven and Man, many martial artists have flocked to the capital recently, and the government has built four arenas in the outer city.

"We'll take two of them. Jingsi, you'll challenge the capital's martial artists with your Vajra body. Jingchen, you can take an arena at random and preach there.

"As for me, since I'm here in the Great Feng, I will pay a visit to the Jianzheng."

After Master Du'e finished speaking, he stepped out of the room and gazed at the setting sun in the west, murmuring, "The Central Plains have not felt the might of our Buddhist sect for a long time."

...

Late at night, Xu Qi'an went to the Jiaofangsi with his colleagues. As always, Song Tingfeng shamelessly tagged along, still the same young man he used to be. Among them were also Li Yuchun, who once commented that "the beds in the Jiaofangsi are never in sync," and Yang Yan, who claimed, "I'm just here for a drink."

Fuxiang was deeply attached to Xu Qi'an. Every time he brought people to the Reflecting Plum Pavilion, she would always appear with her qin in hand, graciously performing a piece. Several Oiran, who had close ties with Xu Qi'an, also joined the fun, giving Freeloader Xu the chance to be embraced from both sides.

But Freeloader Xu was far from happy. While others were joyfully drinking until dawn, he was calculating in his head: \*Motherfucker, this little outing will cost me at least a hundred taels of silver.\*

When he came to Jiaofangsi alone to indulge in love with the Oirans, it was all very elegant and pure, with no vulgar exchanges of money for favours. However, bringing along so many colleagues for drinks—there was no way it could be free.

Even though Fuxiang was willing to cover the "costs" out of her own pocket, how could Xu Qi'an, a dignified seven-foot man, who prided himself on never taking advantage of the common folk, agree to such a thing?

\_In the future, I must be more cautious when treating others, especially at a money-pit like the Jiaofangsi... Tomorrow, I'll try expense it from Duke Wei. Hopefully, he'll approve, seeing how loyal I've been.\_ Forcing a smile, Xu Qi'an raised his cup and said, "Drink up, everyone! Don't be polite, we won't leave until we're all drunk!"

\_Get wasted, everyone, so I can save on paying for the women!\_

However, despite drinking late into the night, this group of warriors stubbornly refused to get drunk. Xu Qi'an had no choice but to end the party with a forced smile and an internal curse, saying,

"To make sure boss gets a good night's sleep, everyone should follow the rhythm when shaking the beds tonight. Don't go off-beat."

Li Yuchun: "..."

...

The next day, Xu Qi'an, riding Erlang's horse, galloped back to the Constabulary. Upon arriving at One Blade Hall, he picked up a brush and ink... and made the clerk write an expense request.

\*Participants in the event:\* twenty-one.

\*Activities:\* Praising the court, praising Duke Wei (drinking, merrymaking, and spending the night with women).

\*Total cost:\* one hundred and sixty-four taels, three cash silver.

After writing the note, Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment. Realizing that Silver Gong Xu had a reputation to uphold, he had the clerk send the request to the Tower of Noble Spirit.

Not long after, the clerk returned, reporting, "Duke Wei said the note wasn't written by you personally, showing a lack of sincerity."

\_Whew...\_ This implied that Wei Yuan wasn't happy but was still willing to reimburse him. Xu Qi'an chuckled to himself, \_Rest assured, Duke Wei, I'll repay your great kindness with unwavering loyalty!\_

Xu Qi'an immediately rewrote the reimbursement slip, dried the ink, and folded it neatly, having the clerk deliver it once more.

Soon after, the clerk returned with a new message: Not approved!

\_...Is he messing with me?!\_ Xu Qi'an, fuming, asked, "What did Duke Wei say?"

The clerk hesitated for a long time, cautiously replying, "He mocked your poor handwriting. Does that count?"

\_Wei Yuan, you son of a...\_ Furious, Xu Qi'an kicked the clerk out of the room.

...

After the spring imperial examinations, the most anticipated event should have been the palace examination a month later. The phrase "first rank on the golden list" had always stirred the hearts of many, from common folk to the Emperor and his ministers.

However, in the 37th year of Yuanjing, there were especially many disruptions. First, there was the Conflict of Heaven and Man within the Daoist sects, a once-in-sixty-years event, which was far more captivating than the imperial exams.

Later, a diplomatic mission from the Western Regions arrived in the capital, causing yet another stir.

Buddhist temples in Great Feng were sparse, and high-ranking Buddhist monks were rare. However, stories about Buddhist masters had been passed down in the Jianghu for generations—tales of reincarnation, indestructible golden bodies, relics that could break all magic, and so on.

Jianghu folk were filled with curiosity about Buddhism, and the Western delegation didn't disappoint. The next day, a young and handsome monk appeared on a platform in the southern part of the city.

He arrogantly declared that he would use the Buddhist Vajra "Diamond Body" to challenge the martial artists of the Central Plains.

This immediately attracted waves of Jianghu warriors, but none were able to break his Vajra Body and left in shame.

In the northern part of the city, opposite the southern platform, another high-ranking monk from the Western Regions took over the stage. However, instead of challenging Great Feng's martial artists, he began preaching.

Citizens flocked to hear the monk's sermons, entranced by his words. Some wayward individuals wept bitterly, criminals repented for their sins, and men who had been the last of their lineage for generations were struck by sudden enlightenment, deciding to become monks...

Rumors of all sorts spread through the streets, becoming more and more bizarre. The crowd grew as more people gathered to listen to the monk's teachings.

In the inner city, at a restaurant.

A group of Jianghu guests were discussing the monks from the Western Regions. What started as a conversation between two people gradually drew in more participants, until even commoners joined the discussion.

"It's been three days now, and that young monk hasn't lost a single match. Aren't you Jianghu people supposed to be experts? How come you can't even beat a monk?"

"What do you know, you commoner? That's no ordinary monk; he's a high monk from the Western Regions. Even their children can't be underestimated."

"So that's how it is. The Western Buddhist monks are indeed powerful. Compared to them, we're far behind."

"Hmph, aren't the Nightwatchers supposed to be the guardians of the capital? Every Gold Gong is said to be a top-tier expert, so why haven't they stepped in?"

"You outsiders don't understand. The Nightwatchers are busy dealing with corrupt officials. When it comes to external threats, they become cowards," a local citizen scoffed.

A Jianghu warrior, offended, retorted, "Nonsense! Just a few days ago, I saw with my own eyes a Silver Gong injuring a sixth-rank expert with a single slash."

To this, the local replied, "But didn't you just say that even children from the Western Regions' Buddhist sects can't be underestimated? How can our Great Feng martial artists compare?"

"Well, that's true. I've travelled the Jianghu for many years and have never seen such a powerful Bronze Skin and Iron Bones, glowing like gold. The Western masters are indeed formidable."

On the second floor, Young Master Liu withdrew his gaze from the railing and muttered in frustration, "A bunch of frogs in a well! Master, what's the deal with that little monk's body?"

"That's a unique body-strengthening technique in Buddhism, far beyond the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones of a sixth-rank martial artist," the middle-aged swordsman sighed.

"Let the immortals fight. We're just here to enjoy the show," a beautiful woman chuckled.

Unwilling to accept this, Young Master Liu looked at his future sword, which currently belonged to his master, and asked, "Can this weapon, forged by the Sitianjian, break through his body?"

The middle-aged swordsman snickered and didn't bother answering his disciple's naive question.

With her heavy makeup, which was striking but not vulgar, Miss Rongrong frowned and said:



“For the past three days, most of those who have come to the stage are people from the Jianghu. Occasionally, there are a few experts from the government, but their cultivation levels aren’t very high. Why haven’t any high-ranked warriors stepped up?”

“You said it yourself—high-ranked warriors,” the middle-aged beauty shook her head and replied. “We went to see that young monk yesterday. His cultivation isn’t high, but thanks to his Vajra Art, he stands invincible. High-ranking experts have their pride. Winning wouldn’t bring them any glory, and if they have to exert too much effort to break his body’s defences... that would be very embarrassing.”

The middle-aged swordsman nodded in agreement, adding, “The court hasn’t sent any experts either for the same reason. If the other side just sends a young monk to the arena and the court hurriedly deploys high-ranked experts to suppress him, who would look more foolish? The dignified Great Feng must maintain at least this much composure.”

“So we just have to suffer in silence?” Young Master Liu frowned.

Although he usually roamed the Jianghu, spouting insults about corrupt officials and calling the emperor incompetent, he felt a surge of righteous indignation whenever an outsider came to humiliate the Great Feng.

“It depends on whether the Great Feng has any talented young experts,” the middle-aged swordsman said as he sipped his wine.

...

At the same time, in Southern City, a tavern.

Xu Qi’an, dressed in his Silver Gong uniform, stood on the lookout platform, watching the fights on the stage below. To his left was the azure-robed swordsman, Chu Yuanzhen, and to his right was the tall, burly ‘Lu Zhishen’ Hengyuan.

Currently, a young swordsman in white was facing off against Monk Jingsi. The young man’s cultivation was not bad, at the peak of the Refining Qi stage, though it was unclear which prestigious sect he hailed from.

The white-clad swordsman’s techniques were unpredictable, aiming directly at Monk Jingsi’s vital points. However, Monk Jingsi stood unmoving, allowing the iron sword to strike his body and produce sparks, occasionally batting away strikes aimed at more sensitive areas like his crotch or eyes.

Though his body was like unbreakable diamond, his clothes were not, and he still had to protect his waistband.

After hundreds of exchanges, the white-clad young hero exhausted his strength. Reluctantly, he sheathed his sword and cupped his hands, saying, “I admit defeat!”

A chorus of boos erupted from the crowd. Both the citizens of the capital and the Jianghu folk were disappointed.

“That one seems to be the senior brother of Butterfly Sword,” Xu Qi’an said, pointing to the side of the stage at a spirited, beautiful female warrior.

Butterfly Sword of the Luya Sword Pavilion was one of the Four Flowers of the martial world, alongside Miss Rongrong, the Thousand-faced Thief, and the female sabre expert from the Shuangdao Sect.

She was indeed a striking beauty, the kind that immediately caught the eye.

Hengyuan and Chu Yuanzhen glanced over at her but quickly lost interest and looked away.

“Hengyuan, this is the unique body refinement technique of the Western Buddhist sects, part of the warrior monk system,” Chu Yuanzhen commented. “Aren’t you tempted?”

“Of course I am,” Hengyuan replied.

Hearing this, Xu Qi’an’s heart stirred. Could the body refinement technique demonstrated by Monk Jingsi be a method that, without the need for cooking or pounding the body, could rival the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage?

“I’m tempted too,” Xu Qi’an said, swallowing.

Hengyuan glanced at him. “The Vajra Sutra is not something that just anyone can master. Without a foundation in Buddhist teachings, it’s impossible to learn it. Unless you have natural Buddhist roots.”

\*Are we talking about proper "Buddhist roots" here...?\* Xu Qi’an silently ridiculed in his mind.

“Little monk, let’s ‘ave a go!”

At that moment, a burly man squeezed through the crowd and leaped onto the stage.

This man’s body emitted a subtle, divine light invisible to the naked eye, marking him as a warrior of the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage.

The crowd, which had just been disappointed and booing, immediately grew excited.

The little monk from the Western Regions had dominated the arena for three days, and finally, a true Bronze Skin and Iron Bones expert had come to challenge him.

“This is going to be interesting,” Xu Qi’an said with a smile.

As he spoke, his gaze swept through the crowd, and to his surprise, he spotted a familiar face.

It was a middle-aged woman dressed in plain clothes, her hair pinned with a simple wooden hairpin. She had a somewhat plump figure and a stern expression, staring intently at the stage without blinking.

Chapter 286. Aspect of the Dharma

"Oh, I've spotted someone I know, I'm gonna go meet them."

Leaving that one sentence behind in the air, Xu Qi'an turned to go downstairs, discreetly circling around the crowd from a distance, making his way toward the middle-aged woman in plain clothes and a simple wooden hairpin.

Chu Yuanzhen's eyes followed him, and when he saw that Xu Qi'an's target was an older, rather plain-looking woman, he immediately burst out laughing:

"Xu Ningyan's tastes are quite... unique."

Hengyuan furrowed his brow, about to defend Sir Xu, when he noticed from afar that Xu Qi'an was sporting a rather roguish grin, chatting with the woman.

The woman ignored him, even giving him a scornful look, but Xu didn't seem to mind, chattering away incessantly.

Seeing this, Hengyuan lost the confidence to defend him, awkwardly saying, "Youthful indulgence might not be a bad thing."

Chu Yuanzhen laughed heartily. "The Oirans of Jiaofangsi may be beautiful, but they always feel like they're lacking something. But a married woman like this... there's a certain charm to it."

Hengyuan sighed helplessly, silently lamenting Xu Qi'an's misfortune.

Sir Xu was excellent in every regard, except his reputation for being a womaniser.

Thanks to Number One's propaganda within the Heaven and Earth Society, Xu Qi'an's image as a lecher had been deeply ingrained in the hearts of those who held fragments of the Earth Book.

"Auntie, why are you here again? From your attire, you don't seem like a woman from a wealthy household. Aren't the daily necessities of life—rice, oil, salt, soy sauce, vinegar, and tea—appealing to you? Why are you always out here looking for excitement?"

"The man up on the stage—is he your husband?"

"How much silver did you bring with you today? Be careful not to get robbed. Come, come, this official will take you somewhere less crowded."

Other than that coquettish roll of the eyes at the start, the auntie didn't respond to him at all, letting him ramble endlessly in her ear.

She showed great disdain for the dashing Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an didn't take offense, merely shifting his focus to the ongoing duel on the stage.

This time, Monk Jingsi no longer held back, choosing to engage the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones-ranked warrior in a brutal melee, landing heavy blows.

\_Clang! Clang! Clang!\_

The sound of their punches and kicks echoed like the continuous ringing of a bell or the hammering of a blacksmith's anvil, with bright sparks occasionally flying from their collisions.

The crowd of onlookers cheered in excitement, their applause and shouts never-ending.

A child, captivated by the fight, excitedly ran toward the stage, shouting enthusiastically.

“Beat it!”

Xu Qi'an swept his leg, sending the child flying. The kid soared several meters through the air before landing lightly in the arms of a man, presumably his father, who glared at Xu in anger and shock but didn't dare act out.

“Are you hurt?” the man asked anxiously.

“It didn't hurt at all!” the child said with a cheeky grin.

The auntie turned her head to glance at Xu Qi'an, then immediately turned back to watch the fight, her face expressionless, completely absorbed in the battle.

The fight on stage didn't last long. After about the time it takes to burn a stick of incense, the match was decided. The Bronze Skin and Iron Bones warrior couldn't withstand three punches from Monk Jingsi and his hardening technique was finally broken.

“The Vajra Body of the Buddhist sects truly lives up to its reputation.”

The man cupped his hands in acknowledgment before swiftly leaping off the stage, clearly embarrassed, and quickly departed.

The auntie lightly stomped her foot in frustration.

Xu Qi'an was a little surprised. This auntie, how to put it... she always displayed expressions and mannerisms one would expect from a young girl.

His own aunt occasionally acted this way, but never to such an exaggerated degree.

\*This is a woman who lacks self-awareness about her age...\* Xu Qi'an concluded in his heart, smiling as he said:

“This is like two blades clashing. When their strength is about equal, the better quality blade wins. The Buddhist sect's Vajra Body is said to come from the Buddha himself, while the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones of warriors varies in quality. His loss wasn't unfair.”

The auntie turned her head, looking at him disdainfully, and said, “You sound so confident. Why don't you get up there? Didn't you once cut down a sixth rank martial artist with a single strike?”

Xu Qi'an squinted his eyes and asked in return, “Oh? Didn't you leave that day? How do you know I cut down a sixth rank with one strike?”

The auntie responded with a cold sneer, “I'm not deaf or mute. Unless there was another Silver Gong in Southern City that day.”

“Hey, were you the one who called someone to provoke me that day? Auntie, which household do you belong to? Which department does your husband serve in?” Xu Qi'an stopped pretending and cut straight to the point.

On that day, a sixth rank martial artist dressed like someone from the Jianghu had inexplicably challenged him on stage, even calling out his name. He could have arrested the man directly, but for the sake of pos... putting on a show, he chose to accept the challenge.

Afterward, before he had a chance to interrogate the Jianghu martial artist, someone had taken the man away. Who could have done that except someone “on the inside”? It had to be someone from the military or a retainer of some important figure.

Xu Qi'an suspected it was this very auntie, whose appearance belied her status. And on that day, he had indeed offended her, though it wasn't a serious matter. Still, considering a woman's petty nature, that was another story.

He had reason to believe that the sixth rank martial artist that day had been acting on this auntie's orders.

Hearing his accusation, the auntie smiled sweetly and said, “If you get up there and cut down that little monk, I'll tell you.”

Xu Qi'an shook his head.

“Afraid?” The disdain in her eyes deepened.

\*Yes, I'm afraid. I've finally managed to slip out of the Buddhist emissary's notice, and I have no desire to get entangled with their monks...\* But Xu Qi'an couldn't help resting his hand on the hilt of his blade as he pondered.

“I can't break through his Vajra Body.”

\*Well, it's about time you learned that there's always someone stronger!\* The auntie pouted, her eyes a mix of disappointment and smugness.

At that moment, a swordsman in azure robes leaped lightly from a nearby tavern and landed on the stage.

The crowd of onlookers perked up once more, eager to see another challenger face the little monk, and began to speculate about the identity of this azure-robed swordsman.

“Chu Yuanzhen...”

Xu Qi'an heard the auntie mutter under her breath.

\*She knows Chu Yuanzhen? Well, Chu Yuanzhen was once the zhuangyuan, so he's not unfamiliar to the higher circles of the Great Feng... If Zhuangyuan Chu steps in, it's likely to be a sure win.\*

Xu Qi'an let out a sigh of relief.

That little monk, Jingsi, had been monopolising the stage, which didn't look good for the court's reputation.

"Little monk, I will only make one strike. If you can block it, I'll consider myself defeated," Chu Yuanzhen said with a calm smile, staring directly at Jingsi.

More hisses came from the crowd. The bystanders, seeing the swordsman in azure robes acting so arrogantly, immediately thought less of him.

Everyone had seen how invincible this little monk from the Western Regions was. The arrogant words of the swordsman naturally led people to suspect him of being a fame-seeking opportunist.

"Please, benefactor!" Jingsi clasped his hands in a serene manner, showing no fear.

"Interesting," Chu Yuanzhen smiled, not showing any eagerness to win. He seemed more like someone just here for fun, much like the crowd around him.

Then, Chu Yuanzhen made a move that no one understood. He reached his hand towards the sky, palm open.

The sword on his back remained motionless.

Just when the crowd thought he was bluffing and were about to mock him, someone noticed a pebble rise from the ground.

More and more pebbles began to float, rushing toward Chu Yuanzhen's outstretched hand like a swarm of bees.

With a series of thudding sounds, the pebbles began to fuse together, forming a sword hilt. As the stones continued to gather, a four-foot-long stone sword took shape.

Wow...

A wave of astonished gasps swept through the crowd. Most of the onlookers were here just to be entertained, and the more showy the techniques, the more impressive they seemed.

Chu Yuanzhen's flashy display of forming a sword from stones was a technique that seemed almost magical, far more entertaining than watching the Western monk take hit after hit without striking back.

"Amazing!" The older woman's eyes sparkled as she couldn't help but cheer.

Once the stone sword had fully formed, Chu Yuanzhen gripped it and thrust forward. In an instant, wind and thunder surged as a violent gust rose from the ground, nearly toppling the surrounding crowd.

The sword came too fast for Jingsi to evade. With his hands clasped, the monk neither retreated nor dodged.

Ding... Boom boom boom...

First came a sharp, piercing sound, followed by the deep rumble of qi explosions. Waves of force spread like tides, sending the distant crowd flying.

Luckily, after witnessing such "energy ripples" over the past three days, the onlookers had learned to keep their distance from the stage. Thus, no one was injured, though quite a few had their eardrums pierced from the shock.

Before the first sharp sound could be heard, the older woman's ears were already covered by Xu Qi'an, and in the following explosion of energy, she found herself pressed tightly into Xu Qi'an's arms.

Perhaps never having been embraced by a stranger before, the older woman struggled violently, stomping hard on Xu Qi'an's foot.

When all finally calmed down, the swordsman in azure and the little monk from the Western Regions still stood on the stage. The monk's golden body had lost its lustre, appearing dull and dim. Chu Yuanzhen's sword was gone, and only sand and gravel remained between the two.

\*He lost.\*

Xu Qi'an thought regretfully. Then, he saw the older woman shove him away, swinging a slap at him.

Xu Qi'an raised his hand to block it and grumbled, "You, Auntie, at your age, why are you still so...?"

He didn't finish his sentence, for he caught sight of her pale wrist adorned with a string of Bodhi prayer beads.

"???"

A string of question marks flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind. He stared at the older woman with a gaze that slowly turned more bewildered.

He recognized this Bodhi prayer bead bracelet. On that day in the inner city, when he encountered Daoist Jinlian, he had "won" a piece of the Earth Book Fragment and a string of Bodhi prayer beads from him.

That bracelet had been bought by a noblewoman sitting in a gold-embroidered nanmu wood carriage.

\*It's her?!\*

"Let go..." The older woman, furious and humiliated, gritted her teeth.

Obediently, Xu Qi'an released his hand. The older woman slapped him in return before storming off angrily.

\*No way... no way... That woman, whom Daoist Jinlian praised as someone who would have a deep connection with me in the future, is her?!\*

\*A woman with the right to sit in a golden nanmu carriage—could she be Emperor Yuanjing's cousin or the wife of some prince?!\*

\*What kind of connection could a woman like that possibly have with me? Could it be... No, no, I can't let my thoughts go down that path. Maybe she has a daughter who's beautiful and destined to be with me... But with her ordinary looks, could she really have a daughter that's beautiful as a flower?\*

Recalling the woman's plain appearance, Xu Qi'an quickly dismissed the thought of a youthful mother-in-law, telling himself that the connection may not necessarily be romantic. There could be other types of fate.

\*Come to think of it, I've seen her twice in just a few short days, and her background is as unclear as ever. She's not part of my world, not connected to my work or social circle. In such circumstances, we keep crossing paths... Daoist Jinlian was right. I'm definitely fated to meet her.\*

By this time, the crowd had begun to recover from the aftershocks of the duel. Some kept slapping their ears, speaking loudly as if deaf.

Those lucky enough to avoid ear injuries simply sighed with regret.

"He still didn't win?"

"Are the monks from the Western Regions really that strong?"

Yet, no one criticized Chu Yuanzhen. After all, that sword strike had been nothing short of divine.

...

Xu Qi'an led the little mare, walking slowly alongside Hengyuan and Chu Yuanzhen.

"Zhuangyuan Chu, how much strength did you use in that last strike?" Xu Qi'an asked curiously.

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head and answered with a non sequitur, "That little monk is on the same path as you, yet quite the opposite."

Xu Qi'an suddenly understood. Chu Yuanzhen meant that the monk Jingsi relied solely on his unbreakable Vajra Body, which was similar to how Xu Qi'an only had his one powerful strike.

The difference was that one focused on offense, the other on defense.

"So, Zhuangyuan Chu, do you think my spear can break his shield?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"You can," Chu Yuanzhen glanced at him and smiled, "but also, you can't."

Xu Qi'an gave him a blank look. "Scholars are just as annoying as Buddhists."

"Why is that?" Chu Yuanzhen asked, surprised.

Xu Qi'an chuckled, "Figure it out yourself."

Chu Yuanzhen's face immediately turned sour. After a few seconds, he suddenly understood, shaking his head with a laugh. "Engaging in word games is indeed pointless. Only self-righteous people do such things."

Pausing for a moment, he offered some advice: "Your One Blade from Heaven and Earth is powerful. After incorporating the essence of the Heart Sword, it has no flaws. But in my opinion, it lacks a soul."

\*A soul?\* Xu Qi'an was dismissive of the term.

"You wield the One Blade from Heaven and Earth, but it's just that—a technique. When I wield my sword, it's not just swordsmanship; it's imbued with my spirit. When I'm lazy, my sword energy is lazy. When I'm gentle, my sword energy is gentle. But when I'm angry, my sword intent can pierce the heavens," Chu Yuanzhen said in a deep voice.

"That is intent! That is the soul! That is the true essence of a fourth-rank martial artist!"

Xu Qi'an recalled the imposing "divine auras" of the Gold Gongs at the Constabulary and nodded in understanding. "But as you said, that's the essence of a fourth-rank martial artist."

\*I'm only a seventh-rank Refining Spirit Silver Gong.\*

"I can teach you how to cultivate intent. At a high level, it would be akin to gaining a fourth-rank martial artist's ability in advance. Of course, the effect would be much weaker. But paired with your One Blade from Heaven and Earth, it should be enough to break that Buddhist monk's Vajra Body."



"Mastering an ultimate technique isn't something that can be done in a day," Xu Qi'an remarked.

What he truly wanted to ask was: \*Can I learn this skill for free?\*

"The basics are easy to grasp!" Chu Yuanzhen said with a smile. "I developed this technique within a year of learning the sword. It only takes two or three days to learn the basics, but reaching a high level is incredibly difficult."

"Please, Zhuangyuan Chu, teach me," Xu Qi'an said eagerly.

"I'll start with the key points. It's not difficult. The idea is to infuse your spirit into your sword or blade energy. Simple emotions like joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness are the foundation," Chu Yuanzhen explained openly.

"The Human Sect follows a similar path. What I've done is develop a new method based on their teachings."

...

Lingbao Temple.

In a quiet backyard, Emperor Yuanjing was playing a game of Go with the National Teacher. The aging emperor, who now had a head of fresh black hair, held a Go stone in his hand and sighed.

"Chu Yuanzhen lost too."

The National Teacher, a woman with a strikingly beautiful face and a vermilion mark between her brows, possessed a bewitching blend of youthful purity and mature allure.

Her approach to the game was casual, rash even, seemingly placing pieces without thought. She responded: "An off-hand strike, is that really a loss?"

Emperor Yuanjing nodded. "But regardless, it has elevated that little monk's fame, and by extension, the reputation of the Western Buddhists."

Although Emperor Yuanjing remained in the palace, he was well-informed about everything happening in the capital, especially regarding the Western delegation.

"Does Your Majesty feel a sense of guilt?" The National Teacher, Luo Yuheng, furrowed her elegant brows as she noticed she had slowly played herself into a losing corner. In the midst of their conversation, she slyly shifted two chess pieces.

"Guilt?"

Emperor Yuanjing scoffed, then sighed. "There's some guilt, yes, but more than that, it's frustration. The monk is so young and already so powerful. The capital has no rising talents to match him. What can I do?"

"It's not as though I can send out elite fighters from the Imperial Guard. That would only make us look worse."

Luo Yuheng realized that Emperor Yuanjing was blaming Chu Yuanzhen for holding back, failing to decisively defeat the monk, and instead becoming a stepping stone for his fame.

"The baldie didn't come here with good intentions. I doubt he'll return to the West easily," Emperor Yuanjing continued.

"If there's something you want to say, just say it directly, Your Majesty," Luo Yuheng replied.

"A few days ago, Master Du'e sought an audience with the Jianzheng, but was refused. The Jianzheng has been long secluded in the Stargazing Tower, indifferent to worldly affairs. If he continues to ignore the high monks from the West... I hope the National Teacher will step in when the time comes."

Luo Yuheng nodded slowly, discreetly moving two more chess pieces.

Having lost three games in a row, Emperor Yuanjing left Lingbao Temple in frustration. On his way back to the palace, he instructed the elderly eunuch, "Have Wei Yuan find someone. I don't want to see that little monk on the arena stage again."

His expression was dark and cold.

The eunuch obediently replied, "Yes, Your Majesty!"

...

In the southern district, at the Welfare Hall.

In the backyard, Xu Qi'an and Chu Yuanzhen sat cross-legged as Chu explained the principles of cultivating intent.

Master Hengyuan didn't shy away either, sitting nearby, eavesdropping on the lesson.

"It sounds simple enough, but how do you actually infuse 'intent' into a blade?" Xu Qi'an asked as he stood up, swinging his black-gold saber.

Following Chu Yuanzhen's instructions, he tried to channel his intent into the blade.

But it didn't work.

"Your emotions are too calm. There's no joy, no anger, no sorrow... how can you nurture intent like this?" Chu Yuanzhen said helplessly.

"It's my fault. I possess an inner calm, unmoved by even a mountain collapsing before me," Xu Qi'an remarked.

True intent, at its core, was an emotional state.

After a moment's thought, Chu Yuanzhen suggested, "Actually, there's a quicker way."

Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up. "Please, Zhuangyuan Chu, tell me."

"Come here," Chu said with a mischievous smile.

Xu Qi'an immediately stepped forward.

\_Smack!\_

Chu Yuanzhen slapped him across the face.

\*You motherfu...\* Xu Qi'an was furious. "Zhuangyuan Chu, you did that on purpose, didn't you?"

"Can you channel intent now?"

"No effect at all," Xu Qi'an said, rubbing his stinging cheek.

"Then it means you're not ready yet."

Suddenly, Chu Yuanzhen lunged at him, slapping him repeatedly. Xu Qi'an struggled to dodge, darting left and right, but still received a dozen slaps.

Faced with Chu's relentless assault, Xu Qi'an grew genuinely enraged. At that moment, he felt a sudden surge of inspiration, an urge to release his pent-up anger.

\_Whoosh!\_

A sharp blade of energy slashed through the air, distorting the atmosphere.

Chu Yuanzhen seemed unwilling to directly clash with the sharp momentum, tilting his head to avoid it. The blade energy shot into the sky, gradually dissipating.

"It really works!" Xu Qi'an was delighted.

That slash just now had exceeded the usual limits of his sabre qi. If used in combination with \_One Blade from Heaven and Earth\_, its power would undoubtedly rise to another level.

"You truly are a prodigy," Chu Yuanzhen marvelled.

As he had said, it could be learned in a day or three. Xu Qi'an had mastered it in just one hour.

\*No, the real prodigy is you as a teacher...\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

"But if every time I unleash this slash, I need to get hit first, wouldn't that be a bit too much of a loss?"

Chu Yuanzhen responded, "That's why I said it's easy to begin, but difficult to master. Your current Intent needs external stimulation; you can't summon it at will."

\*Ah, yet another secret technique to train... But I'm still that boy who is left helpless after one slash...\* Xu Qi'an felt as though his path of cultivation had fallen into an irreversible state.

The more techniques he learned, the stronger his potential burst of power, but his means of dealing with opponents remained limited and extreme.

\*However, the power I can unleash is growing stronger and stronger. I wonder if one day, I'll be able to truly defeat any master in the world with a single slash?\*

...

That evening, Xu Qi'an wasn't surprised to hear his second uncle mention the battle at the Southern City's arena.

"They say a highly skilled swordsman took action, but still didn't defeat the monk from the Western Regions," Second Uncle sighed.

"With so many experts in the capital, no one can defeat a little monk?" Auntie said, joining the conversation casually while eating.

"There are many experts in the capital, but word would spread poorly if they used their strength to bully someone weaker. There are plenty of young talents, but they say that the monk has the invincible Vajra body. Even against someone a rank higher, it's not certain that they could break through," Second Uncle explained, giving his less informed wife a lesson.

Auntie was infuriated after hearing this. "In this huge capital, they can't even find one outstanding young person? If only our Erlang practiced martial arts, he'd knock that little monk out with one punch!"

Xu Erlang quickly waved his hands. "No, no, mum, I can't do that."

After a pause, he added, "The delegation from the Western Regions is indeed getting arrogant. Recently, I was drinking with my classmates, and they were all quite indignant about this. There's a monk in the Northern City who preaches every day, drawing thousands of common folk to listen for hours at a time. But those people are all poor. How can they afford to waste time like this?"

"And then there's that little monk in the Southern City, spouting off arrogant words just because of his thick skin. Yet the martial artists in the capital seem unable to deal with him. My classmates are saying that the martial artists here are only good at lording over others within their own circles."

This comment simultaneously offended Xu Dalang and Second Uncle.

"You scholars only know how to flap your mouths with your empty theories," Xu Qi'an scoffed.

"True."

Xu Pingzhi gave his nephew a nod of approval and, at the same time, deflated his son's ever-growing ego since getting number one in the metropolitan exam. "Erlang was never suited for martial arts. But Lingyin here, with her chubby arms and legs, has plenty of strength—more talent than him."

Xu Lingyue glanced at her sister, who was busy devouring her meal, and covered her mouth to laugh softly. "If that were true, we'd be eating ourselves poor in no time."

After some more idle chatter, Second Uncle sighed. "It's not just the scholars. Even my colleagues in the City Guard are resentful. The monks from the West have become far too arrogant."

\*The arrogance of the Buddhists has its reasons—they're here to hold the imperial court accountable, after all...\* Xu Qi'an thought silently.

...

Night fell.

A monk wearing azure robes returned to the guesthouse and went straight to see Master Du'e, clasping his hands in respect. "Senior Uncle, the Jianzheng still refuses to meet with you."

In the soft orange candlelight, Master Du'e's wrinkled face was half illuminated by the flame and half hidden in shadow.

"I see. You may leave."

The monk bowed and exited.

Master Du'e closed his eyes again, and from the crown of his head, a beam of golden light shot skyward.

The golden light rose slowly, cutting through the night sky and disappearing. After a few seconds, the clouds above the city began to churn, and thunder rumbled across the heavens.

Amid the rolling black clouds, a strand of golden light appeared, and then a torrent of radiant gold surged, enveloping the entire capital.

The clouds trembled violently, revealing a massive Buddha face, its eyes wide open, its brows furrowed in anger.

The face of this manifestation was enormous, its sheer size covering half the capital.

Within the city, the common folk remained oblivious, but all the cultivators felt a simultaneous surge of fear and dread in their hearts, as if they were small animals cowering before a thunderstorm.

Xu Qi'an was startled awake from his sleep, his face pale as he rushed outside. Looking up at the sky, he saw the golden Buddha looming over the capital.

Such a sight was beyond anything he had ever seen in his life, as if a Buddha had descended to overlook the mortal realm from the heavens.

"Bang..."

The doors of the east wing and the neighboring rooms flew open at the same time. Second Uncle and Xu Erlang rushed out, their legs trembling as they looked skyward.

"Father, Brother... Is the Western Region's Buddhist sect making a move on the capital?" Xu Erlang asked in a trembling voice.

Xu Pingzhi was dumbstruck, having never seen such a terrifying scene in his life.

"Jianzheng, why do you not dare to face me?"

At that moment, the manifestation spoke, its voice booming like thunder, reverberating throughout the capital.

"Good heavens... The high-level powers of this world are truly terrifying..." Xu Qi'an muttered, his legs shaking as he stood there in awe.

Chapter 287. The \*Wrathful Vajra\*

Xu Qi'an suddenly had an urge to joke around and shout, "Wife, come quick and see the Buddha!"

However, he didn't have a wife, and the oppressive might exuded by that dharma aspect left him with no other emotions, only an instinctive desire to kneel in worship.

"Jianzheng, why do you not dare to face me..."

As the thunderous inquiry echoed, Xu Pingzhi's knees buckled, and he collapsed to the ground.

Amidst the fear, a surge of humiliation rose within him. Supporting himself with both hands on the ground, Xu Pingzhi gritted his teeth and growled, "Ningyan, Ciqiu, don't kneel! Stand up, stand up!"

The last two words were shouted out.

After shouting, Xu Pingzhi received no response from his nephew or son. Looking up, he saw his son gripping a pillar, veins bulging on his forehead, seemingly struggling to remain standing. His nephew leaned against the doorframe, both hands holding his sabre, stubbornly raising his head to gaze at the towering dharma aspect in the night sky.

Then, both his son and nephew looked over at him.

For a moment, the atmosphere froze. Fortunately, Xu Ciqiu and Xu Ningyan discreetly looked away.

\*Whew... these two brats still know how to save my face!\* Xu Pingzhi's awkwardness subsided.

\*Look at Second Uncle being so pathetic—seems like all his energy is drained by Auntie!\* Xu Qi'an mocked inwardly.

\*Father is so embarrassing! If you're going to kneel, just kneel, but why shout about it? At least there's no one else here!\* Xu Ciqiu silently resented his father's disgraceful behaviour.

"Big brother, w-what is that high monk planning to do? You work as a Nightwatcher, surely you know something about this?" Xu Ciqiu stammered, doing his best to keep his voice steady.

He assumed that a disagreement had arisen between the Western Regions and the Great Feng, which led to the delegation from the Western Regions coming to the capital. From the actions of the monk tonight, it was evident that the Western Regions were furious.

If this wasn't handled properly, the alliance between the Western Regions and the Great Feng could fall apart, potentially even leading to war.

As a scholar, Xu Xinnian had an instinctive curiosity about such significant matters.

Xu Qi'an pondered and replied, "There's been some disagreements, but not as serious as you would think... as for what it is, I'm not so sure. At-"

He stopped mid-sentence. The reaction of the Buddhist high monk had also caught him off guard.

Suddenly, he realized something important—when the monk Shenshu was sealed in the Great Feng years ago, perhaps it wasn't just an act of mutual assistance between allies. There might be more to the story.

If it were purely an act of assistance between allies, why would the Buddhist sect be so angry and make such a grand show of force?

...

The Tower of Noble Spirit!

Wei Yuan, draped in an azure robe, stood on the watchtower, looking up at the giant Buddha face that covered half of the capital. Its body was infinitely vast, hidden within the rolling black clouds.

"The Arhat of Execution!"

His eyes remained calm, his posture upright, and his azure robe billowed fiercely in the wind, as though locked in a stare-down with the dharma aspect.

Inside the teahouse behind him, Yang Yan and Nangong Qianrou sat cross-legged, heads bowed, struggling to resist the overwhelming pressure of the dharma aspect.

The higher their cultivation, the greater the oppression they felt.

"The Buddhists remain as powerful as ever," Wei Yuan sighed.

He glanced back at his two adopted sons and said faintly, "If Xu Qi'an were here, I can guarantee that no matter what, he would still be standing."

Yang Yan and Nangong Qianrou were both ashamed.

...

In the imperial palace, Emperor Yuanjing, wearing his dragon robe, emerged from his chambers with the old eunuch. He raised his head to gaze at the Buddha face hanging over the palace. The Buddha's eyes, which exuded an innate majesty, seemed to be staring right at Emperor Yuanjing.

Within the palace, the Imperial Guard stood with spears in hand, alert but unafraid. Not a single one knelt, nor did they show any sign of fear.

The entire palace seemed immune to the might of the dharma aspect.

"Hmph!"

Emperor Yuanjing snorted coldly and returned to his chambers.

...

The capital, with its population of millions and countless martial artists, including the recent influx of jianghu figures, trembled like it was the end of days that night.

A deep fear and panic gripped their hearts.

At the same time, they couldn't help but wonder—this is the capital, the core of the Great Feng. How is it that no one can stop this display of Buddhist dominance?

First, the young monk fought on the arena for four days without defeat. Tonight, a massive dharma aspect descended, shaking the entire city and questioning the Jianzheng from on high.

The Jianzheng was the guardian deity of the Great Feng, the only first rank cultivator.

How could the court's dignity remain intact after this? How could the Jianzheng's dignity remain intact? How could the dignity of the millions of people in the capital remain intact?

Countless people were hoping the Jianzheng would act.

At Sangpo Lake, within the newly built Yongzhen Shanhe Temple, the brass sword belonging to the founding emperor hummed and trembled, as though waiting for its master's call.

Amid the fervent anticipation of the masses, a crisp, clear voice echoed: "Such clamour!"

The voice was melodious and sharp.

Luo Yuheng, adorned with a lotus crown, wearing a robe embroidered with yin-yang koi, and a cinnabar mark on her brow, stepped out of her chamber, her hair wildly fluttering in the wind.

She looked up at the Buddha face, extended her fair right arm, and suddenly clenched her fingers. From the pond, a rusty iron sword shot out of the water and landed in her palm.

With a casual toss, Luo Yuheng sent the sword flying, saying, "Go!"

The sword light soared upward in a large arc, initially resembling a faint flame, like a meteor rising against the heavens.

Before long, the tip of the sword pushed up a hundred-meter-wide cone of disturbance, caused by the air being pushed up in front of it.

Moments later, the fiery red light illuminated the golden sky, intertwining with the dharma aspect's brilliance. What had started as a faint line had grown to an unimaginable size.

It was like a torrent of red flame.

The dharma aspect snorted coldly, and from the rolling black clouds emerged two colossal golden hands, reaching out to grasp the sword light.

The two massive golden hands closed in, trapping the sword light between them.

In the next instant, a clap of thunder roared over the capital. The dharma aspect's hands crumbled into golden particles, followed by the collapse of the Buddha face. The red sword light mingled with the golden glow, blending into a magnificent array of colors that danced in the night sky.

For the people of the capital, this breathtaking scene was likely something they would never witness again in their lifetime.

"Thud..."

Just as Xu Pingzhi managed to stand up, he knelt again.

Xu Qi'an and Xu Xinnian once more turned their heads away, avoiding the sight of their (second uncle's) father's disgrace.

\*So that was Luo Yuheng? As expected of a second rank Daoist leader. If that sword had come for me...\* Xu Qi'an felt a complex mix of emotions.

He had interacted with Luo Yuheng several times and, despite knowing that she was a second rank Daoist, he lacked a clear understanding of her true strength.

It wasn't until this moment that Xu Qi'an fully realized just how powerful a second rank Daoist was.

\*If I had known from the start that this woman was so fierce, I would never have dared to stare at her chest back then...\* Xu Qi'an shivered, feeling like he had been flirting with death all along.

Half an incense stick's time later, the sky returned to calm. The red and golden lights faded, the clouds dispersed, and a crescent moon hung on the horizon.

It was as if nothing had ever happened.

The three men of the Xu family let out sighs of relief. Xu Qi'an sat on the threshold, Xu Xinnian on the horizontal railing of the corridor, and Xu Pingzhi slowly rose to his feet, his voice steady as he said:

"Ah, to be young. Your bodies are still strong, unlike mine. When caught off guard, I can't even stand properly.

"But back in the day, your father was a warrior, iron-boned and indomitable, charging through the battlefield without flinching."

He looked up at the sky and snorted, "This time I was prepared. If it happens again, I definitely won't lose face like that..."



Just as he finished speaking, the sound of Buddhist chanting filled the air, and the once-calm clouds began to churn again.

From deep within the clouds, a glimmer of golden light appeared, accompanied by chanting. The clouds surged, and another divine figure materialized.

Unlike the previous one, this figure was more lifelike, more vivid, and the Buddha's face was even more menacing.

Naturally, its aura was entirely different, far more oppressive than before.

Plop.

The iron-boned Xu Pingzhi knelt once again.

However, this time, neither Xu Xinnian nor Xu Qi'an mocked him. Xu Xinnian collapsed directly onto the ground, drenched in sweat, while Xu Qi'an half-knelt, hands pressing against the ground.

In his mind, he envisioned the towering giant, filling his heart with defiant, combative energy, and slowly, he straightened his back, standing tall with his blade in hand.

\*Does Du'e really intend to battle the Jianzheng...\* Xu Qi'an's heart sank. The capital, with its millions of people, could not withstand such a conflict.

Bang!

The sound of a door opening broke the tension.

Xu Lingyin, rubbing her eyes, stepped over the threshold and asked, "Daddy, it's so noisy outside..."

"Get back inside, quickly!" Xu Pingzhi shouted.

Xu Lingyin tilted her chubby face upward, pointing to the sky with her pudgy finger, "There's an immortal in the sky."

She was completely enraptured, utterly unaffected by the pressure of the divine figure.

...

"The Vajra's Glare?!"

Luo Yuheng pursed her lips and turned back into her meditation chamber, paying no more heed.

Among the nine major Dharma Aspects of Buddhism, one was the Vajra's Glare, a form that only a first rank Bodhisattva could manifest.

She left it to the Jianzheng to handle; it had nothing to do with her.

At this moment, atop the Stargazing Tower, on the Bagua Platform.

The elderly Jianzheng, dressed in white robes with white hair and beard, stood at the edge of the platform, hands behind his back. The night wind blew through his beard.

"The agreement from back then was between you and the royal family. What does it have to do with me?" Jianzheng retorted irritably.

The enormous, boundless dharma aspect spoke, its voice like rolling thunder, though only Jianzheng could hear it: "If it weren't for the intervention of my Buddhist sect back then, would you have reached first rank?"

"And now, with Shenshu's return, if you don't give our House a proper explanation, I will personally come to the capital one day."

"If you dare come to the capital, I'll send you back into samsara," Jianzheng sneered. Then, he asked, "What do the Buddhists want?"

"It's not what we want; it's what you need to do. You should know how disastrous Shenshu regaining his body would be for our Buddhist House," the Wrathful Vajra roared.

"And do you know how disastrous it would be for my Great Feng if Shenshu continues to be sealed in Sangpo?" Jianzheng countered.

The Wrathful Vajra said, "This is your Sitianjian's own mess—don't expect us to clean it up."

"At this point, saying things like that is pointless. You've not got ten minutes left to maintain this dharma aspect. Hurry up and finish your business; don't disturb the capital's citizens' sleep," Jianzheng said impatiently.

"Two things: First, track down the remnants of the Wanyao Kingdom and recover Shenshu's severed arm. Second, our House wants to borrow your Disk of Heaven's Secrets for three years."

"If you have the guts, come and take it," Jianzheng said coldly.

"Very well!"

The Wrathful Vajra dharma aspect dissipated.

...

"Huh, there's no fight this time?"

Xu Qi'an looked up at the sky, where the divine aura of the Wrathful Vajra dharma aspect had already faded. There had been no earth-shattering clash like before.

The figure had merely lingered in the sky for a while before vanishing.

Xu Pingzhi and Xu Erlang both exhaled slowly, their bodies feeling utterly drained.

"Lingyin, stop standing there like a fool. Help your father and your brother back to their rooms," Xu Qi'an called out.

"Go away!"

Xu Pingzhi scolded his nephew and grumbled, "Get over here. What's the point of raising you for twenty years if you're not going to help?"

Xu Qi'an quickly hurried over to assist.

After helping his uncle and cousin back to their rooms, Xu Qi'an reached out mentally to the monk Shenshu: "Master, master... Did you see what just happened?"

Chapter 288. The Deal Five Centuries Ago

"What is the matter?"

A distant and ethereal voice echoed in Xu Qi'an's ears. He saw a dense fog, swirling and shifting, and as he passed through it, a dilapidated temple emerged. Sitting cross-legged at the entrance was the handsome monk Shenshu.

"Master, it's nothing much... I just witnessed a big scene and thought I'd come to share it with you," Xu Qi'an said earnestly.

"Don't call my name in your heart when you're in front of masters of the Buddhist sect," Shenshu warned.

"Understood, Master. I won't hold you back."

Xu Qi'an recounted the events that had unfolded in the night sky over the capital and marvelled, "The Jianzheng's technique for concealing the secrets of heaven is truly impressive."

"As a Rank One, it's naturally impressive," Shenshu replied warmly. "However, it may be due to my fragmented memory, but I don't recall anything about the Arcanist system."

\*Well... that's understandable. The Arcanist system only appeared after Shenshu had been sealed for a century.\*

Xu Qi'an said, "Master, a few days ago, I probed the monk from the Western Regions and gained some understanding of your identity."

Shenshu's gentle face turned solemn as he focused intently on Xu Qi'an. "What did you find?"

Xu Qi'an replied, "The monks of the Buddhist sect say that you are a traitor, and because they couldn't kill you, they sealed you instead."

"A traitor of the Buddhist sect..."

Shenshu murmured the words to himself, his expression slowly changing, a mixture of sadness and anger flickering deep in his eyes.

The fog in this hidden world trembled, flowing like a raging river.

"You've done well. I've remembered some things," Shenshu said after a long pause, his emotions settling.

What memories? Could you share them with me, Master? Xu Qi'an thought silently.

As soon as the thought arose, the fog before his eyes closed, obscuring the dilapidated temple and the monk Shenshu. Then, the entire world began to fade.

The scenery shifted, and the furnishings of the room came into view as Xu Qi'an returned from Shenshu's mysterious world.

\*That old aunt has some connection with me. I'll ask Daoist Jinlian about it later. Otherwise, it's going to nag at me like a bone stuck in my throat...\*

\*The Buddhist delegation, I don't know when they'll leave. I should keep a low profile during this time. Master Du'e is stronger than I anticipated.\*

\*My mental strength has reached a peak. I can probably attempt a breakthrough, but after witnessing the profound mystery of the Buddhist Vajra Palace, I find myself looking down on the martial artists' Bronze Skin and Iron Bones...\*

\*Master Shenshu's memory is incomplete, and he doesn't know this technique. Hengyuan's not a lucky child; there's no way he'll learn such profound skills.\*

Lying in bed, Xu Qi'an's thoughts wandered. Suddenly, a familiar pang flickered in his heart.

As he reached under his pillow to retrieve a fragment of the Earth Book, he sat up, lit the oil lamp, and settled at the table to check the messages.

【ONE: Daoist, what rank is Master Du'e, the leader of the Western Regions delegation?】

It was rare for the lurking maniac, Number One, to send a message proactively.

【NINE: Du'e is a Rank Two Arhat, with the Executioner \*phala\*<sup>[^1]</sup>.】

A Rank Two Arhat—just as I suspected... but what is the Executioner phala? Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment, confirming that there was no record of "phala" in the archives of the Nightwatcher's constabulary.

【FOUR: The so-called phala are a concept in Buddhism. Arhats have three great phala: Execution of evil, Non-returning, and the grand Arahat, with the Grand Arahat being the highest. 'Execution' and 'Non-returning' are considered equal.】

\*I see... Though I don't fully understand, it sounds quite powerful!\* Xu Qi'an slowly nodded.

After the explanation, Number Four added, 【However, I felt that the second Dharma aspect that appeared tonight was outrageously powerful.】

The first Dharma Aspect was formed by Du'e's Executioner Phala, representing his own power. The second Dharma Aspect's aura was even grander and more imposing.

【NINE: That was the Wrathful Vajra Aspect, one of the nine great Dharma Aspects of Buddhism.】

【FOUR: No wonder, so it was a Bodhisattva's intervention.】

\*A Bodhisattva—a Rank One Bodhisattva?!\* Xu Qi'an gasped and instinctively looked around, a chill running down his spine, feeling like a thief hearing police sirens.

If a Rank One had come to the capital, Xu Qi'an thought his situation had just become much more precarious.

\*Stay calm, stay calm. Every system has its own unique strengths. Concealing the secrets of heaven is an Arcanist's specialty. I must trust in the Jianzheng's power...\* He could only comfort himself this way.

At that moment, Li Miaozen chimed in, sending a message: 【What are you all talking about? What do you mean by Dharma Aspects appearing tonight?】

Number One usually clashed with Number Two, and Number Four avoided her because of the conflict between Heaven and Man. Daoist Jinlian had yet to respond, so the conversation fell silent for a while. Finally, Number Six, Hengyuan, sent a message to explain:

【The Buddhist delegation arrived in the capital, causing a bit of a stir. Tonight, Dharma Aspects appeared over the city.】

A few seconds later, Li Miaozen sent another message: 【Are they here for the Sangpo case?】

The sealed object beneath Sangpo involved the Buddhist sect, something Number Three had previously revealed to the Heaven and Earth Society. Thinking of Xu Qi'an's death, she felt a pang of sadness.

【SIX: Yes.】

Li Miaozen sighed, sending a message: 【The Buddhist sect is indeed powerful, worthy of being the greatest religion in Jiuzhou.】

\*So the Buddhist sect is the greatest force in Jiuzhou... I hadn't thought of it that way before. I should go to the constabulary tomorrow to check the records.\*

【FOUR: Li Miaozen, why haven't you reached the capital yet?】

【TWO: Heh, isn't it better for you to live a few more days?】

\*Hey, hey, miss, speak more kindly—lead with virtue!\* Xu Qi'an silently mocked.

【TWO: I chose to travel by land to the capital, and along the way, I've been ridding the world of corruption, slaying a few corrupt officials and local tyrants.】

No one in the Earth Book group chat replied for a while. Then Daoist Jinlian chimed in: 【By the way, how has Number Five been doing lately?】

There was no response from Number Five.

【TWO: Daoist, you should message her privately. I think that girl has run into trouble again.】

Daoist Jinlian sighed and replied: 【Alright.】

Number Five's adventures could probably fill a book titled \_The Adventures of Number Five\_ or \_Number Five's Bizarre Journey\_... Thinking of this, Xu Qi'an's lips curved into a slight smile.

After sleeping soundly until morning, Xu Qi'an mounted his little mare and headed to the Nightwatcher's constabulary.

He went directly to the archives and arrived at the "Bing" section of the archives. He instructed the clerk managing the records, "Bring me all the documents related to the Buddhist sect."

"And while you're at it, fetch me a cup of tea," he added.

The amount of information related to the Buddhist sect was vast, stacking higher than a person on the table. After filtering through them, Xu Qi'an eliminated the strange anecdotes and "legends" and focused on regionally relevant books such as \_Geography of the Nine Provinces\_ and \_Geography of the Western Regions\_.

About an hour later, he found what he was looking for.

"As expected, in terms of land area, the Buddhist sect ranks first in Jiuzhou. The entire Western Region is filled with Buddhist kingdoms, and its territory is twice the size of the Great Feng, three times the size of the Northern Provinces, and three to five times the size of the Northeastern Provinces.

"Of course, the Western Region is vast but sparsely populated and not fertile land. And, if we include the Southern Marches and the hundred-thousand mountains that were once the territory of the Wanyao Kingdom, the Buddhist sect's 'empire' would be terrifying."

Next, he asked the clerk to bring him paper, ink, and brushes, and he began writing keywords like "Sangpo," "State Religion," and "Eradicate Buddhism" on a piece of Xuan paper.

He recalled a piece of history Daoist Jinlian had shared with him about the founding emperor.

Back then, to overthrow the decaying dynasty in the Central Plains, the founding emperor of the Great Feng borrowed troops from the Northeastern Church of the Warlock God, with the price being that the church would become the state religion.

According to records in \_Geography of the Western Regions\_, Buddhism was also the state religion.

"Judging by the information Princess Huaiqing and I have uncovered, 400 years ago, Buddhism was spreading like wildfire across the Central Plains, clearly on the path to becoming the state religion. However, Confucianism was in its 'With all due respect, everyone here is trash' peak phase at the time.

"They directly pushed for the eradication of Buddhism, and despite the momentum, Buddhism did not overreact but instead withdrew from the Central Plains. I have two theories here: One, Confucianism was indeed so powerful back then that it could not be challenged. Two, the Buddhist sect didn't dare directly confront the Great Feng because they still relied on the empire to seal Shenshu.

"If Confucianism hadn't declined, and considering the strength of the Confucianists and the Sitianjian, Great Feng would undoubtedly be the strongest in all Jiuzhou."

Xu Qi'an used his Qi to destroy the paper and left the archives, heading straight to the Tower of Noble Spirit.

After receiving permission to enter, he ascended to the seventh floor. In the tea room, he didn't hear Wei Yuan's voice, so he habitually looked toward the balcony, and sure enough, he saw Wei Yuan there.

The eunuch with whitening temples, hair dishevelled, was lying on a reclining chair, dressed in an azure robe, leisurely basking in the sun.

"Did you kneel last night?" the eunuch laughed.

"Not even a twitch in my legs," Xu Qi'an scoffed.

"Come over and give my head a rub," Wei Yuan beckoned.

Xu Qi'an glanced around, confirmed that Nangong Qianrou wasn't present, and confidently approached. Like a possessed master masseur, he began massaging the acupoints on Wei Yuan's head.

"The unsealing of the sealed artefact under Sangpo was Great Feng's fault, however one puts it. The Buddhist high monks were just throwing a tantrum; there's no need to worry," Wei Yuan comforted him.

\*He thinks I'm here because of last night's events... Duke Wei, you think I'm at the first layer, but I'm actually on the eighteenth! Not only do I know a Bodhisattva intervened last night, but I also know the whereabouts of Shenshu...\*

Xu Qi'an cut to the chase and asked:

"Why did the Great Feng help the Buddhist sect seal an evil entity?"

By now, he was already Wei Yuan's confidant, and many secrets that couldn't be publicly discussed could be shared freely.

"Did you discover something?" Wei Yuan raised an eyebrow.

"When I was investigating the Sangpo case, I stumbled upon a piece of history. Five hundred years ago, the crown prince was playing in Sangpo, fell into the water, and later developed hysteria, eventually passing away.

"Also, five hundred years ago, Emperor Wuzong seized the throne. Five hundred years ago, the Buddhist sect from the Western Regions suddenly began proselytizing in the Central Plains, and within a century, Buddhist temples flourished everywhere. Then, a century later, Confucianism pushed for the eradication of Buddhism.

"The formation beneath Sangbo is engraved with Buddhist scripture. Based on these clues, I speculate that the evil entity was sealed five hundred years ago, right?"

Wei Yuan pondered for a long time before slowly nodding. "Indeed, the thing sealed beneath Sangbo is tied to a transaction between the Buddhist sect and Emperor Wuzong.

"At that time, Emperor Wuzong was a brilliant strategist with numerous skilled generals under his command. However, when it came to seizing the throne, there was one obstacle he could never bypass. And that obstacle could have caused his grand ambitions to vanish into thin air."

A figure flashed through Xu Qi'an's mind: \*the first Jianzheng!\*

"The first Jianzheng of the Sitianjian, a first-rank arcanist. As long as the Jianzheng was there, no one could shake the imperial throne as long as the dynasty's fate remained intact. Facing such an unbeatable and immovable obstacle, Emperor Wuzong chose to ally with the Buddhist sect of the Western Regions.

"That marked the beginning of the alliance between the Buddhist sect and Great Feng. The Buddhist sect helped Emperor Wuzong kill the first Jianzheng, and in return, Emperor Wu allowed Buddhism to spread in the Central Plains and agreed to seal the evil entity for them. The current Jianzheng, having coldly watched from the sidelines as Sangpo lake was blown up, is as good as having torn up said deal"

\*Fuck!\*

\*So that's what happened! I always wondered—if Emperor Wuzong succeeded in seizing the throne, what happened to the first Jianzheng...? It turns out that the Buddhist sect was involved back then. With the presence of a Buddha, someone beyond the mortal ranks, it's reasonable that they could kill a peak arcanist like Jianzheng.\*

\*Wait, then what role does the current Jianzheng play in all this?\*

As these thoughts swirled, Xu Qi'an began to tremble slightly, feeling a twinge of regret for asking Wei Yuan in the first place.

"The Jianzheng, why... why did he allow the evil entity to escape...?" After a long hesitation, Xu Qi'an finally asked the burning question.

Because this question was likely tied to his own fate.

The Jianzheng knew about the plot of the Wanyao Kingdom's remnants, yet he chose to turn a blind eye; Jianzheng knew that Shenshu's severed arm had been attached to him, yet he chose to ignore it; Jianzheng had even secretly helped him!

\*What is the Jianzheng's goal, and what is he scheming?\*

\*Isn't he afraid of the Buddha coming after him with furious divine retribution?\*

Wei Yuan chuckled. "Who knows?"

He closed his eyes, enjoying the massage from his loyal subordinate, and said, "At this morning's court session, Master Du'e proposed a competition and debate with the Jianzheng, wagering the Disk Heavenly Secrets and Diamond Sutra. He hopes His Majesty will agree."

"His Majesty has sent word to the Sitianjian, and Jianzheng has agreed. In the afternoon, there will be an imperial decree announcing it to the entire capital. We'll have some excitement to look forward to."

For some reason, Xu Qi'an suddenly felt a chill run down his spine. A sense of unease crept in, and he asked cautiously:

"How will they compete?"

Wei Yuan shook his head. "We'll find out today."

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## Chapter 289. Borrow Someone

\*Why would such a powerful Buddhist sect choose to seal its own traitor in the Great Feng? The reason either lies in some special property of Sangpo Lake or in Shenshu himself...\*

Xu Qi'an hesitated slightly before voicing his doubt.

"I am just an ordinary man, and know nothing of such secrets," Wei Yuan shook his head, indicating his lack of knowledge.

"Xu Ningyan, you're twenty this year, correct?" Wei Yuan suddenly asked.

"Yes, Duke Wei," Xu Qi'an was puzzled, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu from this line of questioning.



As expected, Wei Yuan followed up by saying, "It's about time for you to start a family."

In this world, people generally lived long lives unless afflicted by natural disasters or accidents, easily living past sixty. Seventy or eighty was not uncommon. Therefore, the marriageable age range was broad. Some girls married as early as fourteen, their bodies not yet fully developed, which led to some awkward scenes. On the other hand, some women remained unmarried into their twenties, untouched by suitors, and equally pitiful in their own way.

Xu Qi'an had seen both cases first-hand. His aunt married his uncle at sixteen, while Princess Huaqing, already twenty-five, was still single. Reflecting on the question of lifespan, Xu Qi'an couldn't help but wonder why the Confucian Sage passed away at 82, which seemed a bit premature for such a remarkable figure.

However, Wei Yuan was a frail little bird, and discussing such high-level matters with him felt unnecessary and pointless.

Xu Qi'an tentatively asked, "What are you suggesting, Duke Wei?"

"The Right Censor-in-Chief has a granddaughter who has also reached the age of marriage. She is quite beautiful," Wei Yuan said.

"Quite beautiful... I fear she might not be a suitable match for me," Xu Qi'an shook his head.

"The fourth daughter of the Marquis of Weihai, aged seventeen, is also looking for a husband. You're a viscount, so the match would be fitting," Wei Yuan suggested.

"Your subordinate does not wish to boast, but a mere daughter of a marquis is hardly a suitable match for me," Xu Qi'an declined once again.

"How about the niece of the Grand Commissioner of Canal Transport? I'm in need of funds, and if you marry into his family, it would solve my financial woes," Wei Yuan remarked, looking at him.

\*Wait a moment, I joke about being a eunuch's son, but you're not actually my father! The desire for a political marriage is too obvious here...\* Xu Qi'an considered for a moment and asked, "Is she beautiful?"

"Naturally, she is quite lovely," Wei Yuan replied.

Upon hearing the phrase "quite lovely," Xu Qi'an immediately hit pass, shaking his head, "To be honest, Duke Wei, I've saved up quite a bit of silver. My plan is to redeem the oirans from the Jiaofangsi. If my wife is merely lovely, she won't be able to keep those beauties in line."

Wei Yuan frowned slightly, "What kind of woman do you seek, then? Or perhaps... have you already set your sights on someone?"

\*Set my sights? That's an understatement...\* Xu Qi'an pondered briefly and replied, "First and foremost, she must be stunningly beautiful. Secondly, her status must be noble. Lastly, she must possess considerable talent, someone who can be both a capable lady of the house and a skilled hostess."

Wei Yuan chuckled, "Perhaps I should petition the emperor on your behalf to arrange a marriage with a princess."

Xu Qi'an was suddenly excited, "Duke Wei, are you serious?"

Wei Yuan nodded and gestured toward the door.

"What orders do you have, Duke Wei?"

"Out."

...

After being kicked out of the Tower of Noble Spirit by Wei Yuan, Xu Qi'an didn't return to his One Blade Hall but instead made his way to the newly rebuilt Spring Breeze Hall.

Li Yuchun was about to lead Song Tingfeng, Zhu Guangxiao, and several Bronze Gongs on a patrol. The commotion caused by the Buddhist monks last night was still a hot topic, and the citizens of the capital were abuzz with discussion this morning.

Some marvelled at the power of the Buddhist monks, while others expressed outrage at the religion's audacity, calling for the court to take action and wage war.

From nobles to commoners, everyone was talking about it.

If there were an internet in this era, millions of the Great Feng's citizens would be shouting: \*Bring me my sword!\* — ready to fight the Western Region's Buddhists with their keyboards.

To prevent troublemakers from taking advantage of the chaos or spreading rumours, the constabulary had increased their patrols.

"Yoku yoku!"

Xu Qi'an intercepted Li Yuchun and the others, returned to One Blade Hall to gather his own team of Bronze Gongs, and led a dozen men, all walking with arrogant swagger, to patrol the streets together.

After about half an hour, as they passed by a Goulan, Xu Qi'an said, "Boss, you take my men and patrol over there. I'll take Tingfeng and Guangxiao to the other side."

Li Yuchun asked, "Why make such a confusing arrangement? You take your men, and I'll take mine. There's no need to mix things up like this."

Xu Qi'an thought for a moment and said, "Boss, you take the Bronze Gongs to patrol, and I'll take my brothers to another area. That way, it won't be confusing."

Li Yuchun considered it and found it to be much better, nodding, "Go ahead."

Watching Li Yuchun and the others walk away, Xu Qi'an led his two colleagues into the Goulan.

Familiar with the place, he secured a private room on the second floor, called for a few beautiful girls to pour wine, and the three of them began enjoying food, music, and performances, as if returning to their leisurely patrol days.

"Ningyan..." Song Tingfeng sighed, "I was once a repentant rogue, but I'm always surrounded by bad company."

\*Come on, we all know you're still the same old you!\* Xu Qi'an didn't bother to tease him and instead focused on enjoying the music, opening his mouth to let the delicate girl beside him feed him a peanut.

As the saying goes, diligence is temporary, but laziness is eternal.

During the campaign to suppress the bandits in Yunzhou, the tough environment forced Song Tingfeng to practice diligently every day, but once back in the hedonistic capital, his innate laziness and desire for comfort returned.

Still, he had grown more stable and determined than before, and his cultivation had advanced significantly, which was ultimately a good thing.

\_Clang!\_

Suddenly, the sound of a cup smashing came from downstairs. A drunk swordsman stood up, hiccuping as he angrily cursed the crowd:

"I've long heard that the capital is rife with decadence. From high officials to commoners, all are lost in luxury. At first, I didn't believe it, but in just ten days in this city, I've seen nothing but wine and meat and red-lanterned streets!

"In the North and South City arenas, monks are parading their power, yet no expert dares challenge them. What a disgrace!"

His companions quickly stepped forward to pull him back, throwing a few taels of silver on the table as they dragged the drunken man out of the Goulan.

The performance continued, but the conversations in the hall quickly shifted to the Buddhist delegation.

"That Buddhist sect really is brazen to the extreme. We've suppressed them for four hundred years, and now they dare preach in the capital. I heard some families in the North City have already converted, even going as far as donating all their wealth to build temples for the monks."

"Why doesn't the court intervene? Are we really afraid of the Buddhists? Twenty years ago, during the Battle of Shanhai Pass, we were so much stronger."

"Perhaps the court is considering their alliance... But these days, the government is becoming more and more corrupt."

"Shh, be careful what you say."

"Forget about the commotion last night; those were spats between celestials. But hasn't anyone challenged the young monk in the southern city who has been sitting on the stage for five days? Has our Great Feng lost all its heroes?"

Song Tingfeng put down his cup, pushed aside the woman nestled in his arms, and muttered quietly, "What a mood killer."

"Let's just enjoy ourselves and not worry about such matters. Even if the sky falls, it's not our concern," Xu Qi'an said with a smile.

Let the grandmasters give it their all and embarrass Emperor Yuanjing even more. It would be perfect if the historians recorded something like: \_In the 37th year of Yuanjing, the delegation from the Western Regions arrived in the capital. A young monk held a challenge for five days without defeat, and an old monk summoned a divine aspect to question the imperial court.\_

\*Hehe, that would add another stain to Emperor Yuanjing's legacy!\*

At that moment, a bailiff ran past, holding a bronze gong, banging it as he went, shouting, "The Sitianjian will face off against the Buddhist monks in a duel! The Sitianjian will face off against the Buddhist monks in a duel..."

"Everyone, go to the bulletin board to see the imperial announcement!"

...

When Xu Qi'an arrived at the city gates' bulletin board with Song Tingfeng and Zhu Guangxiao, the wide square was already packed with commoners and martial artists. Soldiers guarding the gates and a few Nightwatchers were maintaining order.

Xu Qi'an took off his sabre and used its scabbard to slap away some of the more irritable, rough-mannered martial artists, helping maintain order while listening to the commoners in the front row recite the announcement.

The gist of the proclamation was simple: the delegation from the Western Regions had come a long way and was warmly welcomed by the court. After friendly negotiations, both sides had agreed to a sustainable development initiative, deepening the relationship between the two nations for mutual progress and prosperity.

Then, the Buddhist monks proposed a duel of magic with the Sitianjian as a "technical exchange," and the Sitianjian had agreed. The duel would take place tomorrow at the Grand Plaza outside the Stargazing Tower, where citizens could watch the spectacle.

"Typical government statement, full of rambling nonsense. It still doesn't explain how the duel will happen... But why is there so much fanfare? Was this Master Du'e's request?"

As Xu Qi'an pondered, he noticed Li Yuchun approaching with his team. He must have been nearby and come over after hearing the bailiff's announcement.

"Boss!"

Xu Qi'an walked over to greet him.

Li Yuchun, seeing the orderliness of the crowd, nodded with satisfaction. "Since returning from Yunzhou, you three have finally shaken off your old laziness and become more mature and responsible."

"That just shows we've grown," Xu Qi'an responded with a grin.

...

By noon, under the scorching sun, a large pavilion was erected outside the Sitianjian, providing shade for the capital's nobles and officials. Over a thousand imperial guards surrounded the plaza, keeping onlookers at bay. Commoners and martial artists could only watch from the outer edges.

After lunch, the Western delegation, led by Master Du'e, left the bustling streets of the outer city and made their way to the grand plaza outside the Stargazing Tower.

Chu Caiwei stood on the edge of the Bagua platform, looking down at the approaching group of monks. Among the sea of azure kasayas, there were a few figures draped in red and yellow.

Leading them was the Arhat Du'e, a withered, dark-skinned old man.

"Teacher, the monks are here to stir up trouble," Chu Caiwei said, excitedly pulling out a piece of cake and getting ready to watch the show.

"Let them come," the Jianzheng sipped his wine and basked in the sunlight, utterly relaxed.

"Teacher, are you going to handle this personally?"

"If I take action, the Bodhisattva will have to come personally. Du'e isn't here to challenge me directly."

"Then who will you send out?" Chu Caiwei tilted her head, analyzing the situation. "Senior Sister Zhong Li is cursed with bad luck—she'd harm herself more than the enemy."

"Senior Brother Song and I are alchemists, not fighters. Second Senior Brother isn't even in the capital... Only Senior Brother Yang is left."

The Jianzheng sighed.

"Why the sigh, Teacher?"

"Unfortunately, your Senior Brother Yang had a mishap in his cultivation yesterday, and can't fight."

"What?" Chu Caiwei was stunned, the cake in her mouth suddenly tasteless. She frowned, worried, "What do we do now?"

"I'm troubled too. That's why I need you to go to the palace and ask His Majesty for a person."

...

Soon after, a woman in a yellow dress rode swiftly into the palace.

Just past noon, Emperor Yuanjing was at Lingbao Temple, studying Daoist scriptures while listening to the National Teacher explain its profound principles, but he couldn't concentrate.

"Is Your Majesty worried about the upcoming duel?" Luo Yuheng asked softly.

Emperor Yuanjing hesitated for a moment before saying, "I have full confidence in the Jianzheng, but... the Buddhists have come prepared. If we lose this duel, what face will my Great Feng have left?"

"The arcanist system is unique, not focused on combat power. It does seem somewhat inappropriate," Luo Yuheng nodded.

Among all the systems of cultivation, the arcanist system had the weakest combat power. Its strength lay not in individual might but in its ability to enhance national strength. The reason Great Feng's military was so formidable was partly due to its superior weaponry—war machines, cannons, and ballistae, all crafted by the Sitianjian. No other system could replicate that.

A ninth-grade physician could save lives; an eighth-grade qi-watcher, and a seventh-grade master of feng-shui could improve the land's arrangement. Even fourth-grade masters of formations specialized in creating magical devices rather than fighting.

Arcanists needed the dynasty; their fates were intertwined.

Emperor Yuanjing's worry deepened.

"Why not ask the dean of Cloud Deer Academy to help? Among all the systems, martial artists are the strongest in terms of raw power. But if there's one system that's the most complete, with no weaknesses, it's Confucianism. The Confucians can handle any situation, no matter how formidable the Buddhists are," Luo Yuheng suggested.

Yuanjing's eyes brightened, but he quickly shook his head. "I tried to bring Dean Zhao into the court last year, but he refused."

In other words, the emperor couldn't persuade the scholars of Cloud Deer Academy to help.

As they spoke, the elderly eunuch hurried in, bowing, "Your Majesty, a message from the palace: Chu Caiwei of the Sitianjian seeks an audience on behalf of her master."

"Let her come to Lingbao Temple," Yuanjing commanded.

The eunuch left, and Yuanjing turned to Luo Yuheng, "The Jianzheng is surely coming about the duel. Stay and advise me, National Teacher."

Though he was the emperor, Yuanjing had little expertise in the mystical arts. He needed Luo Yuheng's guidance to make informed decisions.

Chapter 290. Is This a Relative's Child?

Chu Caiwei received the summons and immediately left the palace, riding with a guard to Lingbao Temple. They passed through gardens and ancestral halls dedicated to the Human Sect patriarchs, arriving at a secluded courtyard deep within the temple.

"Miss Caiwei, please enter," said the eunuch in a python-robe standing at the gate, gesturing with a smile.

Chu Caiwei nodded, stepping lightly into the courtyard, her skirt gently swaying as she entered the quiet room. Inside, Emperor Yuanjing and Luo Yuheng were seated across from each other at a tea table, with a Taoist text and a small incense burner emitting delicate wisps of smoke.

Caiwei glanced around, disappointed to find no snacks on the table. She withdrew her gaze and greeted them with a bow: "Greetings, Your Majesty, greetings, National Teacher."

Emperor Yuanjing studied the young disciple of the Sitianjian, noting her bright almond-shaped eyes, round and sweet face—an open and cheerful girl who could easily lift one's spirits.

"Jianzheng sent you to see us. What is the matter?"

"It's like this—yesterday, Third Senior Brother Yang Qianhuan experienced a Qi deviation during his cultivation. Second Senior Brother is not in the capital, and both Senior Brother Song and I are not skilled in combat..."

Before she could finish, Emperor Yuanjing interrupted her with a frown, "What? Yang Qianhuan suffered from Qi deviation during cultivation?"

The old emperor's expression darkened, as if disaster had struck one after another. Luo Yuheng raised an eyebrow, her delicate gaze resting on Chu Caiwei, sensing that something was off.

Unperturbed, Caiwei continued, "So, Teacher Jianzheng asked me to come and borrow someone from Your Majesty to represent the Sitianjian in the duel against the monks from the Western Regions."

\*Borrow someone?\*

The shrewd emperor did not immediately agree but pondered for a moment, unable to come up with a suitable candidate. He then asked, "Who does the Jianzheng want?"

"A Nightwatcher, Silver Gong Xu Qi'an," Chu Caiwei replied crisply.

The room fell into silence.

After a long pause, Emperor Yuanjing, somewhat incredulous, asked, "Xu Qi'an, Silver Gong Xu Qi'an?"

"Yes, the one who's good at solving cases and who died once on his return from Yunzhou," Chu Caiwei said brightly.

Waving his hand, Emperor Yuanjing sighed, "Of course we know who he is. What we meant is, why Xu Qi'an?"

The Jianzheng's female disciple seemed a bit too simple-minded, requiring everything to be spelled out. Chu Caiwei innocently shook her head, "I don't know."

The emperor let out a breath and dismissed her. "We understand. You may leave."

"Okay." Chu Caiwei left briskly, planning to visit Princess Huaqing's Dexin Courtyard for some tea and snacks, eager to share her recent experience.

After she left, Emperor Yuanjing sat silently for a long time, holding his teacup. In a heavy tone, he asked, "National Teacher, what do you think?"

"Xu Qi'an is indeed talented, but as a mere martial artist, he stands no chance in a duel of magical arts against the monks of the Buddhist sect," Luo Yuheng's voice was calm, her features delicate and flawless, as if carved from jade.

"However, the Disc of Heavenly Secrets is Jianzheng's personal magical artefact, which he would never casually lend. There may be some other reason at play."

Emperor Yuanjing sighed. "Whatever, as he wishes. We can never see through that old man. We have other matters to attend to, we'll return to the palace."

Of all the people in the Great Feng, Emperor Yuanjing had the most distaste for the Jianzheng. His status was such that he could look down upon all civil and military officials, and even someone as esteemed as Luo Yuheng addressed him as an equal.

But the Jianzheng? He was the one man the emperor truly had to look up to, someone he could never fathom.

For an emperor who wielded ultimate power, this was a bitter pill to swallow.

As he boarded his sedan, Emperor Yuanjing ordered, "Summon Xu Qi'an to the palace."

...

"His Majesty wishes to see me?"

Xu Qi'an was outside the Stargazing Tower, watching the spectacle of Arhat Du'e and his monks.

"Yes, a palace guard is waiting for you at the constabulary. You should hurry, Sir Xu," urged the Bronze Gong who brought the message.

\*If I'm late, I won't have any annual salary left...\* Without another word, Xu Qi'an mounted his little mare and hastily rode back to the constabulary.

After meeting the palace guard there, Xu Qi'an silently followed him into the palace, through the Eastern Gate, to the Imperial Study.

Six thick red pillars supported the lofty ceiling of the study, with a large yellow silk-covered desk at the centre. The room was empty.

Xu Qi'an waited quietly for a quarter of an hour before Emperor Yuanjing finally arrived, dressed in a Taoist robe with his hair tied up in a Taoist pin. Instead of sitting on his dragon throne, he stood before Xu Qi'an, scrutinising him with narrowed eyes.

\*...That gaze—there's something strange about it, as if he were sizing me up like a potential son-in-law, part apprehensive, part unfriendly!\*

"Have you heard about the duel between Jianzheng and Du'e?" Emperor Yuanjing asked the small Silver Gong before him.

"Yes, Your Majesty. I just read it on the Imperial Bulletin," Xu Qi'an replied respectfully.

"A duel can be either literary or martial. Du'e and the Jianzheng are both peerless masters and will not fight personally. Such matters are typically left to their disciples."

\*That makes sense. The big shots sit back and direct, while their disciples do the fighting. But what does this have to do with me?\*

 Xu Qi'an wondered.

The emperor's next words struck like a thunderbolt. "The Jianzheng requested you to represent him in the duel."

"...?"

Xu Qi'an's head snapped up, staring at Emperor Yuanjing in stunned disbelief.

The emperor locked eyes with him. "What do you think?"

\*Jianzheng, you old bastard! You know that the divine monk Shenshu resides within me, yet you're sending me straight into the Buddhist bald-headed lair...\*

 Xu Qi'an immediately said, "Your Majesty, I am unworthy, lacking the strength and wisdom required for such a task. I fear I cannot fulfill this duty. Please, allow me to decline."

The emperor snorted. "Since the Jianzheng has made his decision, he won't change his mind. We did not summon you here to listen to excuses. We summoned you to tell you that this duel is a matter of great importance to the empire's honour. You must win, no matter what."

\*How am I supposed to win?\*

 Xu Qi'an thought bitterly, his face expressionless as he saluted and replied, "Your servant will obey his command."

...

Lingbao Temple.



Not long after Emperor Yuanjing left, a woman dressed in layers of intricate white robes, wearing exquisite jewellery and with her face veiled, entered the Lingbao Temple under the protection of a squad of guards.

Without needing an announcement, she headed straight into the depths of the temple and sat down in a pavilion.

Next to the pavilion, atop the pond, sat National Teacher Luo Yuheng, her legs crossed in mid-air, her beauty unmatched.

The veiled woman picked up a small stone and playfully threw it at Luo Yuheng. When the stone approached within three feet of her, a shield of Qi bounced it back, hitting the veiled woman squarely on the forehead.

"Oww!" she yelped, clutching her forehead as she crouched down, annoyed. "So what if you're a Rank Two expert? Does that give you the right to bully people?"

Luo Yuheng opened her eyes, sighed, and said, "Why are you here? Don't disturb my cultivation if there's nothing important."

The veiled woman lifted her skirt and excitedly walked over to the edge of the pond. "The Buddhist Sect is going to duel the Jianzheng. There will be a spectacle tomorrow!"

"Then go watch it."

"Of course I want to watch, but Emperor Yuanjing forbade me from leaving the palace. I'll have to disguise myself and sneak out. But I want a close-up view," she complained.

"You can disguise yourself and have someone take you in," Luo Yuheng suggested with a smile.

"Once I disguise myself, no one will recognise me! How could anyone lead me in?" she grumbled. Annoyed, she switched topics and said, "By the way, that Xu Qi'an is so annoying. I've run into him a few times now. He's just a brazen, shameless scoundrel."

"With your beauty, isn't that only natural?" Luo Yuheng responded.

"See, see! You're not even talking sincerely. You're just saying whatever comes to mind... There's no way I'd ever show my true face. If I did, that lecher would definitely fall in love with me on the spot."

"I disguised myself as a woman with average looks, but one who had an exceptional air and charm..."

Luo Yuheng interrupted, growing impatient. "If you had such exceptional charm, wouldn't it be normal for him to act flippantly?"

She was left speechless for a moment...

"Forget it!" she said, turning away in a huff.

She would never admit that, after disguising herself, she appeared as nothing more than an ordinary woman of modest beauty.

Yet, even when she looked like that, Xu Qi'an still showed interest. That man truly was an indiscriminating, brazen scoundrel.

A lowly man.

"Do you know who will be representing the Sitianjian in the duel against the Buddhist Sect tomorrow?" Luo Yuheng suddenly asked.

The veiled woman perked up her ears.

"Xu Qi'an," Luo Yuheng answered directly.

"Huh?"

The veiled woman immediately turned around, her eyes wide open. "Him? He's representing the Sitianjian?"

Luo Yuheng nodded.

The veiled woman was suddenly outraged, sitting down with her hands on her hips. "Does the Great Feng have no one else? How could they let a mere stinky boy represent the Sitianjian in a duel?"

After fuming for a while, she calmed down when she saw that Luo Yuheng had resumed her meditation. She sat there quietly, her eyes shifting as if deep in thought.

...

At the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi'an sipped tea and recounted the information he had gathered from the palace to Wei Yuan. Wei Yuan, indifferent, said, "Just do your best."

"I'm definitely going to be punished by the Emperor if I lose," Xu Qi'an said, full of worry.

Wei Yuan chuckled, "Don't worry. Tomorrow's duel may not be as difficult as you think."

Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up. "Duke Wei, do you know something?"

Wei Yuan glanced at him. "Use your brain!"

The grand eunuch interjected, "What's the wager for this duel?"

"The Diamond Sutra and the Disc of Heavenly Secrets."

"The Disc of Heavenly Secrets is the Jianzheng's personal artifact, unique in this world. If the duel is lost, you may be punished, but Jianzheng will lose a priceless treasure. Do you think he'd ask the Emperor for you if he wasn't confident?"

\*Am I really that amazing? How come I didn't know this about myself...?\* Xu Qi'an thought.

That evening, Xu Qi'an shared with his family that he would be representing the Sitianjian in the duel with the Buddhist Sect. He added, "If you want to watch the excitement, you can take my badge and go to the Nightwatchers' area."

Xu Pingzhi frowned. "Is it dangerous?"

"It's just a duel. It should... probably be fine," Xu Qi'an said uncertainly, still unclear on the exact details of the duel.

"Oh, can we really watch?" Auntie, always carefree, said excitedly.

"I want to go! I want to go!" Xu Lingyin raised her hand eagerly, between bites of food.

"You want to watch the excitement?" Xu Qi'an was surprised. His dim-witted sister rarely spoke while eating.

"Where there's excitement, there must be good food," Xu Lingyin declared with certainty, a life philosophy she had developed over her six short years.

"Why did the Jianzheng choose Big Brother?" asked Xu Xinnian, the family's only scholar and the resident voice of reason.

Xu Qi'an could only shrug helplessly. "Who knows what the Jianzheng is thinking? Do you know? Because I sure don't."

Xu Xinnian shook his head, indicating that even he, sharp as he was, couldn't guess Jianzheng's intentions.

After dinner, Xu Qi'an practiced his breathing techniques, preparing himself to reach an optimal state for tomorrow's battle. Once he felt ready, he stopped meditating, eager to enjoy a good night's sleep and recharge for the duel.

\*It seems like not going to the Jiaofangsi these last few days was the right choice. A man has to know when to conserve his strength.\*

Just as he closed his eyes and was about to fall asleep, he felt a familiar jolt in his heart.

With a sigh, he took out his fragment of the Earth Book, lit a candle, and checked the messages.

【FOUR: Tomorrow is the duel between Jianzheng and Du'e. I heard a surprising piece of news from the National Teacher.】

【What news?】

The other members of the Heaven and Earth Society all chimed in.

Only Xu Qi'an's expression changed dramatically. \*Shut the fuck up! Shut up!\*

Using his finger as a pen, Chu Yuanxian wrote: 【It turns out that the Sitianjian has chosen Silver Gong Xu Qi'an to face Du'e.】

After sending the message, Chu Yuanxian expected the other members to be shocked and offer their thoughts. Instead, there was no reaction at all.

"...?"

Chu Yuanxian frowned. Did they already know?

【TWO: What's going on with Four? Deliberately keeping us in suspense?】

【SIX: Four isn't that type of person. Maybe something came up unexpectedly.】

\*Four got caught up in something... Haha, thank the heavens! He didn't expose my situation. Otherwise, if Two found out I wasn't dead, she would've revealed my identity to the whole group on the spot...\* Xu Qi'an sighed in relief.

At this moment, he saw a message from Daoist Jinlian in the mirror: 【NINE: I've temporarily blocked everyone, including Four.】

\*Daoist Jinlian blocked Four?!\*

Xu Qi'an was startled and immediately replied: 【Thank you, Daoist.】

【NINE: Welcome.】

\*You're welcome, huh? If Li Miaozen knew about my revival, when she arrives in the capital she could focus her whole energy on preparing for the battle. And you you shit-stirrer, would be useless.\*

【NINE: But a paper cannon cannot produce fire. You're a smart person; you must understand what I mean.】

【THREE: Everything's under control.】

Xu Qi'an planned to talk to Li Miaozen in person, to discuss their shared social-death past, hoping she would agree to keep his identity a secret.

\*Daoist Jinlian, you think I'm at the second level, but actually, I'm at the fifth.\*

【THREE: By the way, Daoist, I seem to have encountered that woman who has a connection to me.】

【NINE: Heh, you two were bound to meet sooner or later. It means your fates are intertwined.】

\*Fates intertwined...\* Xu Qi'an swallowed nervously, sending a message with a mournful expression: 【Is this fate something serious? She's old enough to be my aunt.】

\*That old woman... she's only a few years younger than my Auntie, and Auntie is 36 this year.\*

【NINE: I don't think I ever mentioned the power of that Bodhi bracelet to you. Well, it can obscure one's fate and change appearances. The Buddhist sect excels at concealing one's fate.

【I obtained the bracelet during my travels and charity in the Western Regions. I won it from a monk in a debate.】

\*I see... If the old lady happens to be a charming mature woman, I guess I could accept that. Plus, from my experience in my previous life, women in their thirties are at their prime... Wait, no! I can't let my thoughts stray. Why am I already assuming I'm doomed to have some twisted fate with her?\*

\*This must be Daoist Jinlian's influence, subtly messing with my thoughts.\*

【THREE: Daoist, what do you mean by 'connection'?】

【NINE: Connections come in many forms. Affection between two people creates a connection. But affection can mean friendship, it can mean camaraderie, or it could be as benefactor and recipient.】

\*Whew...\* Xu Qi'an breathed a sigh of relief.

Ending the conversation, he wrapped himself in a thin quilt and drifted into sleep.

...

The next morning, Xu Pingzhi, having taken the day off, returned home to take the women of the family out. He personally drove the carriage to take them to the Stargazing Tower to watch the excitement.

Xu Erlang rode a horse alongside the carriage.

Just as they exited the small alley leading from their house and turned onto the main road, a plain-looking woman stepped out from a simple carriage parked by the roadside and raised her hand to stop Xu Pingzhi's vehicle.

Xu Pingzhi frowned and examined the woman. "Who are you?"

"Are you Xu Qi'an's second uncle?"

"I am."

"Heading to the Stargazing Tower?"

"Yes."

The woman nodded, then, without waiting for an invitation, climbed onto the carriage. "Take me to the Stargazing Tower and tell Xu Qi'an that the matter about picking up my purse is cleared."

Second Uncle originally wanted to throw the woman off the carriage, but after hearing her words, his expression turned somewhat strange.

It sounded like this woman had some entanglement with his nephew?

\*With Ningyan's status and talent, he shouldn't be mixed up with a woman this much older. I must be overthinking things...\*

Xu Pingzhi decided to hold off on asking Ningyan about it until later.

After the old lady climbed into the carriage, she noticed the voluptuous beauty of Auntie and the ethereal elegance of Lingyue, hesitating for a moment. Glancing back at the young man outside, whose handsome appearance was unmatched, she grumbled internally:

\*This whole family has good looks.\*

Then, she spotted the ordinary-looking Xu Lingyin, sitting on the long bench with her short legs dangling, completely absorbed in gnawing on a piece of dried meat.

Auntie, scrutinising the old lady, gracefully asked, "Which family are you from, madam?"

The old lady smiled warmly, "Just a common household. I wanted to see the excitement at the Sitianjian, but I couldn't get in. I happened to know... Sir Xu's nephew, so I'm here to tag along."

Auntie nodded. As long as this woman had no ties to her husband, she didn't care.

The two women, close in age, exchanged a few casual words before Auntie realised that, despite calling herself a commoner, this woman's demeanour was anything but ordinary.

She spoke elegantly, smiled with reserve, and was clearly not someone from a typical household.

\*She must be a woman from a notable official's family, someone acquainted with Ningyan... But where is her husband?\*

At this point, the old lady glanced at Xu Lingyin and casually asked, "Is this a relative's child?"