

## Nightwatcher 291

Chapter 291. A High-Key Entry

"That's my daughter!"

Auntie frowned, picked up Lingyin, and placed her on her lap.

"Doesn't she look like me?" Auntie asked, slightly displeased.

\*How does she resemble you at all? She looks like she has nothing to do with you...\* The elderly lady's smile froze briefly, but in an instant, she regained her gentle expression and said softly:

"Looking closely, her brows and eyes really do resemble you a bit. I must have been mistaken."

Hmm, those brows and eyes do resemble that coachman outside.

The journey continued in silence.

Xu Pingzhi drove the carriage to the vicinity of the Stargazing Tower. First, he heard a noisy hubbub, and turning the corner, he saw a sea of people.

At a glance, the crowd numbered at least one or two thousand, and that was just a small part of the common people present. One could only imagine how many people radiated outward from the Stargazing Tower—it was an overwhelming number.

"This is even more lively than the Spring Festival..." Xu Pingzhi reined in the horse, stopping the carriage outside.

"Why did you stop?" came Auntie's voice from inside the carriage.

"No more road ahead, it's all people," Xu Pingzhi explained. "We'll get off here."

Auntie lifted the carriage window and, with her husband's help, got out. Xu Lingyue also dismounted with her father's assistance, and Little Pea was carried down by Xu Pingzhi.

The elderly lady frowned. Normally, when she got on and off a carriage, a maid would bring a small wooden stool. She was not used to this.

Luckily, the carriage was simple, and the bottom was close to the ground, unlike her luxurious golden nanmu carriage, which had a floor as high as a person's waist.

She jumped down with ease.

Xu Pingzhi waved to a nearby \*Yudao\* City Guard and instructed, "Watch the carriage."

While speaking, he flashed his City Guard token.

The young Yudao Guard responded respectfully.

Xu Pingzhi led his wife and children through the crowd toward a cleared passage created by the Imperial Guards. Along both sides of the passage, Imperial Guards stood, keeping the commoners at bay and forming a "safe passage" for officials and nobles.

At the entrance to the passage, two Imperial Guards crossed their spears, blocking their way.

Xu Pingzhi took out the token given to him by Xu Qi'an. After a glance, the Imperial Guards let them through.

"Ningyan's status is getting higher and higher," Auntie said happily. "Husband dear, I never dreamed we'd one day sit with the capital's officials and nobles."

Xu Xinnian couldn't help but grumble jealously, "Mother, you'll soon be a titled lady."

Xu Pingzhi delivered a quick verbal jab: "You should first think about how to stay in the capital."

Xu Xinnian immediately deflated.

The academy's plan was to send him to Qingzhou, away from the capital, to make his mark.

But Xu Xinnian didn't really want to go. Going to Qingzhou meant being far from his parents, his brother, and his sisters. If he couldn't return to the capital after his three-year term, he'd have to serve elsewhere for another three years.

Three years after three years, he'd only be able to see his family when returning to report on his duties.

There was also another reason: if he couldn't get into the Hanlin Academy, his path to the Cabinet was practically sealed off.

Father's "My son has the potential to become Prime Minister" would turn into an empty boast.

After walking through the "safe passage," the family looked around and saw a large official area with many shaded pavilions. Civil officials, military officers, and nobles sat in their respective zones in an orderly yet distinct manner.

Moreover, there were many noblewomen and young ladies, most of them bringing their families to watch the contest.

For these aristocratic women, the Great Feng's reputation was secondary—being entertained was the real priority.

As Xu Pingzhi scanned the area, he led his family to the Nightwatcher Constabulary's section, where the main seat was occupied by a man with greying temples in a billowing azure robe.

Flanking him was a sea of Gold, and behind the Gold Gongs were Silver Gongs. The Bronze Gongs had been assigned to guard duty and were not qualified to watch the contest from under the pavilion.

Xu Pingzhi approached with his family, cupped his hands in a salute, and quickly led his family to their seats without drawing attention.

The famous Wei Yuan and the Gold Gongs ignored him, much to Uncle Xu's relief. Blending in as an invisible figure was preferable.

The middle-aged lady also sighed in relief. Being a nobody was really good.

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Among the many shaded pavilions, the most extravagant one was a large platform covered with yellow silk. Tables were arranged beneath the pavilion, where members of the royal family sat.

Even the empress, who had clashed with Consort Chen in the harem, was there. Everyone was chatting and laughing, appearing like harmonious sisters without any past discord.

The four princesses were present, with Huaiqing sitting at the head, and Lin'an by her side.

As for the princes, the crown prince was still confined and couldn't attend, but the others were all present.

This magical duel, to the royal family, was not only an entertaining spectacle but also concerned the court's reputation and their own honour.

"Where is Xu Qi'an? Why hasn't he come out yet? Can he beat those bald monks? How are the monks going to compete in the contest..."

Lin'an chattered nonstop, her sparkling peach-blossom eyes darting around. Not seeing her lackey, she deflated.

"No chance!" The seventh prince shook his head. "That Xu Qi'an is just a martial artist. How can he contend with the Buddhist monks? Besides, with his meagre cultivation, can he really cope?"

The third prince chuckled in agreement: "Unless they compete in poetry."

The two princesses and the other princes couldn't help but laugh.

Lin'an, furious, glared at her brothers and sisters and snapped, "Are you so happy if he loses? Should We order a Buddha statue for each of you?"

The third princess frowned, "We were just talking. What's the matter with you, Lin'an?"

The other princes all frowned.

Ever since the Fu Consort case, Lin'an had grown more irritable and had become increasingly rude to her siblings, speaking sharply.

Huaiqing said calmly, "If it were a Daoist contest, the strongest would naturally win. The same applies to other systems. But Buddhism is different. Buddhism values enlightenment, a pure heart, and Zen wisdom.

"Xu Qi'an may only be a seventh-grade martial artist, and there are many who surpass him in cultivation. But what good is higher cultivation? Can anyone's cultivation be higher than that of Arhat Du'e?"

Huaiqing's words always left people speechless, unable to refute.

The princes and princesses fell silent.

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The canopy adjacent to the royal pavilion was where Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen sat, sipping his wine. He noticed that his daughter's gaze kept wandering toward the area where the Nightwatchers were seated.

Frowning, he asked, "Mu'er, what are you looking at?"

Miss Wang withdrew her gaze and replied with a faint smile, "It's my first time seeing the famous Duke Wei in person. His bearing is indeed extraordinary."

After speaking, she glanced out of the corner of her eye at a certain exceptionally handsome young man.

"By the way, why haven't I seen His Majesty?" she asked nonchalantly, diverting her father's attention.

Prime Minister Wang glanced over at the royal pavilion and chuckled, "With the two women in the palace at each other's throats, His Majesty finds it bothersome and didn't want to come down. He's likely observing everything from the Bagua Platform."

Miss Wang responded with a light "Oh," then continued, "Father, what is the reason for the Western Region delegation's visit to the capital this time? Their sudden challenge to a duel seems rather perplexing."

An emissary group doesn't just arrive without reason; there must be a purpose behind it. The intense atmosphere surrounding the Buddhist sect these days made it clear that the delegation's visit was far from friendly.

"It might be related to the Sangpo case," Wang Zhenwen remarked casually.

Miss Wang furrowed her brow, extracting two pieces of information from her father's response. First, even as the prime minister, he wasn't fully aware of the situation. Second, the Sangpo case likely concealed deeper secrets.

Just as she was about to probe further, Wang Zhenwen waved his hand impatiently. "You're just a young lady—don't concern yourself with matters of the court. All those clever little tricks of yours will be better put to use on your future husband."

Miss Wang pouted her lips, but said no more. Sexing the moment while her father wasn't paying attention, she shifted her gaze back toward the Nightwatchers.

\*When this duel is over, I'll host a literary gathering at the manor...\* she thought to herself.

On the other side, Xu Pingzhi, drawing on his years of experience working in the capital, scanned the various canopies, identifying prominent figures he recognised. Of course, there were far more he didn't recognise.

Still, he noted that the closer to the royal pavilion one was seated, the higher the person's status.

Suddenly, he had a sense of standing on the stage of imperial power in the capital, and it was all thanks to Ning Yan... After this duel, if Ning Yan emerges victorious, he will become famous in the capital, renowned throughout the Great Feng... But if he loses, he will be ridiculed for a long time. And should the event be recorded in history, he might bear the scorn of future generations.

Thinking of this, Uncle Xu felt a complex mix of emotions.

"Dear, is that princess over there the one who came to offer prayers for Ning Yan that day?" Auntie asked, recognising the serene and radiant Princess Huaiqing from the crowd.

Xu Pingzhi gave a small grunt in acknowledgment.

Auntie continued, "The princess next to her, wearing the red dress, is quite pretty too, though... her gaze seems rather flirtatious. She doesn't look very proper."

Xu Pingzhi was startled and hastily whispered, "Stop talking nonsense. Don't speak ill of the princess in public like this—do you want our entire family executed?"

Auntie quickly shut her mouth.

"What's so unspeakable about it? There's not a single decent person in the royal family of the Great Feng," the older lady said indifferently.

\*We don't even know you. Go mind your own business...\* Xu Xinnian thought inwardly.

Xu Pingzhi let out a long breath, forcing himself to ignore the woman, and instructed his family, "In occasions like this, it's best to look, listen, and say little. Do nothing, and nothing will go wrong... Lingyin!?"

The two words "Lingyin" came out in a high-pitched tone.

At some point, Xu Lingyin had toddled over to the azure-robed eunuch. She stood there, looking up at him with wide eyes, pointing at the food on the table, and asked with innocent anticipation, "Uncle, can I eat your food?"

Seeing this, Xu Pingzhi felt a numbness shoot up his spine from his tailbone all the way to the top of his head.

The Gold Gongs around Duke Wei furrowed their brows simultaneously, wondering where this child had come from with so little sense of propriety.

Zhang Kaitai, who had attended the memorial for Xu Qi'an, recognised the little girl and quickly explained, "Duke Wei, this is Xu Ningyan's youngest sister."

The Gold Gongs' expressions softened as they sized up Xu Lingyin, thinking that this child, unafraid of strangers and with such boldness, would surely achieve great things one day.

Wei Yuan picked up a piece of candied fruit and handed it to her.

Xu Lingyin took it and gobbled it up in a few bites.

"That's not how you eat candied fruit. The longer you keep it in your mouth, the longer the sweetness lasts," Wei Yuan said with a smile.

"If I wait too long, all the sweets will be eaten by someone else," Xu Lingyin frowned. "If I just keep eating, it will always be sweet... Uncle, I want more."

Wei Yuan chuckled and gave her a few more pieces of candied fruit. After eating for a while, Xu Lingyin shyly asked, "Uncle, why aren't you eating?"

Wei Yuan shook his head, smiling.

"You're not eating because you don't want to," Xu Lingyin blinked her clear, innocent eyes and cautiously tested, "If you're not eating, I'll finish all of them."

"You think you can eat all of them?" Wei Yuan laughed, glancing at Xu Lingyin's small belly and then at the table filled with fruits, candies, and exquisite pastries.

"Duke... Duke Wei..."

Xu Pingzhi nervously approached, bowing low and trying to steady his trembling voice. "My daughter is mischievous. Please don't take offense."

Wei Yuan raised his sleeve and handed a yellow pear to Xu Lingyin.

Jiang Lyuzhong, observing the scene, smiled and said, "Lord Wei is just chatting with the child. You can go back now."

Xu Pingzhi glanced at Little Pea, then at Wei Yuan, who paid him no mind. Left with no choice, he turned and walked away.

"Father, why are you so worried? Big Brother is a Silver Gong, well-regarded by Lord Wei. Lingyin won't get into trouble," Xu Erlang reassured.

Xu Pingzhi sighed.

Young people didn't understand how terrifying Wei Yuan is. Anyone who lived through the Battle of Shanhai Pass knew that Wei Yuan was far from the amiable person he appears to be.

Time passed slowly. The food in front of Wei Yuan dwindled as he glanced at Xu Lingyin's small belly. He frowned and placed his hand on her head, then pressed various parts of her body for a while.

"What a shame," Wei Yuan said regretfully.

"Father, what's wrong?" Yang Yan asked.

"This child's bones are strong, and her natural foundation is excellent, but her tendons and ligaments are too inflexible. She's not suitable for martial arts training," Wei Yuan sighed.

"No wonder she eats so much. Is this girl a bottomless pit?" Nangong Qianrou teased.

"Ptui ptui ptui..." Xu Lingyin spat at him, her little eyebrows shooting up. "You're a bad person."

She still remembered this pretty sister, the one who tricked her family into thinking her big brother was dead, making her parents cry for so long.

Nangong Qianrou snorted, pulling out a handkerchief to wipe the spit off her trousers.

Before they knew it, the time had come. Master Du'e, who had been meditating cross-legged under the pavilion, opened his eyes and said in a resonant voice, "Jianzheng, do you know of the Sumeru Mustard Seed?"

"A mere parlour trick!"

A mocking laugh echoed from above the heavens.

In that moment, whether among the dignitaries or the commoners outside, everyone's spirits soared with excitement.

The main event had begun!

Master Du'e drew a golden alms bowl from his sleeve and gently tossed it forward.

Boom!

The bowl, heavy as a thousand pounds, crashed into the stone floor, cracking it deeply and embedding itself in the ground.

A pure golden light shot up from the bowl, and in the sky above, a towering mountain appeared. Winding stone steps led deep into a forest, with a temple faintly visible at the mountain's peak.

"A divine technique..." Auntie was dumbfounded, her eyes wide and mouth agape.

Except for the martial artists who had cultivation, none of the ordinary people who witnessed this scene could manage their expressions, and the crowd erupted in amazement.

"Father, what is the Sumeru Mustard Seed?" Nangong Qianrou furrowed her brows.

"This is a Buddhist parable." Wei Yuan glanced at Xu Lingyin, who was oblivious to everything around her, and said indifferently:

"Mount Sumeru hides mustard seeds, while a mustard seed contains Mount Sumeru. It is said that Buddha had a mountain called \*Sumeru\*, which was his domain. Wherever he went, the domain followed."

Yang Yan recalled the Battle of Shanhai Pass twenty years ago, and the scene of Buddhist monks transporting armies. He suddenly understood: "A Buddhist realm within the palm of one's hand?"

Wei Yuan nodded. "Within the golden bowl, there indeed hides a mountain."

"Jingsi, enter the mountain and guard the second pass," Master Du'e ordered.

The handsome monk dressed in azure stood up, pressed his palms together in a gesture of respect, and then, under the watchful eyes of the crowd, stepped into the golden bowl.

The next moment, on the vast scroll unfurled in the sky, a young monk appeared, climbing the mountain.

He climbed the steps at a steady pace, reaching the mountainside where he sat cross-legged.

Golden light descended from the sky, converging on him. In an instant, his body was covered in a radiant golden glow, as though he had been cast in gold.

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"So this world really has the Sumeru Mustard Seed," Xu Qi'an was speechless.

Yang Qianhuan, with his back to Xu Qi'an, nodded. "the Sumeru Mustard Seed, also known as a Buddhist realm in one palm. However, this should be an ownerless world, hidden within the golden bowl."

"If it were a realm with an owner, then victory or defeat would be decided by its owner's will, how would that be fair."

Chu Caiwei stuffed a bag of pastries into Xu Qi'an's arms and said sweetly, "Xu Ningyan, take these and eat them on your way up the mountain."

"...Thanks, but I'm not hungry." Xu Qi'an politely declined.

Behind him, a group of white-robed arcanists cheered him on: "Go, Young Master Xu! Though we don't know why Jianzheng chose you, the teacher must have his reasons."

"You must return triumphant, Young Master Xu!"

\*We'll see if I return triumphant... but for now, let me show off in front of the whole capital...\* Xu Qi'an patted Yang Qianhuan on the shoulder and said:

"Senior Brother Yang, after today, you will understand what it means to perform be a saint amongst men!"

...

Outside the arena, on the rooftop of a tavern, swordsman Chu Yuanzhen and the burly bald-headed Hengyuan stood side by side, gazing at the radiant young monk Jingsi. The top scholar smacked his lips and said:

"A Gold-cast body... This Sumeru world has enhanced Jingsi's Vajra Body. With Xu Ningyan's current strength, it would be impossible to break it."

Hengyuan felt conflicted. As a Buddhist disciple, he should have stood with the Buddhists. But at the same time, he was a citizen of the Great Feng, and it was Sir Xu the Benevolent who was fighting.

"What happened last night? Why didn't you receive my message?" Chu Yuanzhen asked.

"Daoist Jinlian blocked it," Hengyuan replied.

Earlier this morning, Chu Yuanzhen had come to watch the 'show' with Hengyuan and also inquired about last night's missed messages. After comparing notes, they both concluded that Daoist Jinlian had blocked Number Four's message.

"I knew it was Daoist Jinlian who blocked it, but why?" Chu Yuanzhen said, puzzled.

"Daoist Jinlian didn't want you to reveal that Xu Qi'an was representing Sitianjian in the duel?"

"Hmph, do you think that makes sense?" Chu Yuanzhen sneered.

"It doesn't," Hengyuan shook his head.

"I have a feeling there's more to this." Chu Yuanzhen pondered, but he didn't dwell on the matter and instead asked:

"You stayed at Sanyang Station for three days. Did you gain anything?"

"The Diamond Sutra can't be passed down easily. Uncle Du'e told me that if I wanted to view the Diamond Sutra, I could return to the Western Regions with him and practice at Mount Sumeru for three years," Hengyuan said.

"So you could fully become a Buddhist and sever all ties with the Great Feng?" Chu Yuanzhen smirked.

"Not exactly," Hengyuan defended. "The Diamond Sutra isn't something just anyone can cultivate. Aren't you curious why it's Jingsi who came to fight, and not someone else?"

Chu Yuanzhen's mind stirred. "Is Jingsi the only one in the Western Regions delegation who mastered the Diamond Sutra?"

Hengyuan nodded. "Either one is born with a Buddha-nature, able to comprehend its profound meaning, or one must go to Mount Sumeru to listen to Buddhist teachings for a chance to understand the Diamond Sutra."

Suddenly, Chu Yuanzhen clapped his hands and exclaimed with frustration, "So even if Xu Qi'an wins this duel and obtains the Diamond Sutra, it would be useless?"

"Because a lustful person like Xu Qi'an could never possess any Buddha-nature."

Hengyuan was silent for a moment, then slowly nodded.

As they talked, they heard Master Du'e announce loudly, "This contest will be a mountain climb! If one reaches the top, enters the temple, and still does not convert to our Buddhist faith, then we shall admit defeat. The Sitianjian has three attempts."

Hearing this, Wei Yuan smiled.



"A mountain climb..." Yang Yan murmured. "The path will undoubtedly be fraught with challenges. One wrong step, and it will be an instant defeat."

After Master Du'e finished speaking, he closed his mouth and meditated silently.

Both inside and outside the arena, the audience waited for a long time, yet Sitianjian still did not send anyone to compete. For a time, rumours and discussions broke out.

"Why hasn't Sitianjian acted? Are they afraid?"

"Where is the Jianzheng? Say something, Jianzheng!"

"What's going on? If Sitianjian was scared, why did they agree to this duel in the first place? Do they want to embarrass the Great Feng even more?"

Suddenly, someone exclaimed excitedly, "Look! Someone's coming out of the Stargazing Tower!"

In an instant, countless heads turned, and all eyes were on the gate of the Stargazing Tower.

From the hall on the first floor, a cloaked figure slowly walked out, holding a wine jar and wearing a hood, head lowered, face obscured.

The moment the cloaked figure stepped down the stairs, a deep chant echoed across the arena, carried by a surge of energy that reached everyone's ears.

“\*At fifteen and twenty, a sword in hand, I wandered the Jianghu far.\*”

As the cloaked figure took his second step, the deep voice suddenly grew impassioned:

“\*One day I soared, the wind rose high, like a roc nine-thousand li.\*”

\*This...\* In the pavilions, one after another, civil officials instinctively stood up, and paid their respects to the figure.

On the third step, the cloaked figure pointed to the heavens, his voice turning from passionate to majestic:

“\*Where the seas end the heavens make shore, I stand atop the warrior's peak!\*”

Inside and outside the arena, the eyebrows of many martial artists shot up, their expressions odd. Some among the Jianghu crowd outside even stirred their energy in response.

On the fourth step, the cloaked figure let out a long howl:

“\*I fought across three thousand miles, one blade against a million men.\*”

Wei Yuan raised an eyebrow, leaning slightly forward.

The generals all rose abruptly to their feet.

On the fifth step, the figure let out a soft sigh:

“\*If the heavens birthed not Xu Ningyan, then all Jiuzhou will be night that never ends!”

Xu Xinnian was fucking furious.

This was the greatest poem he had ever written, born from the depths of despair.

\*How shameless, big brother!\*

He glanced around and saw the stunned faces all around him. They were all gazing intently at the cloaked figure, utterly captivated.

\*When I recited this poem, my family mocked me, but when my brother does it, he is admired by the masses, respected by everyone...\* Xu Xinnian fumed.

In his anger, he looked to the woman beside him. She was staring at the cloaked figure, entranced. Princess Huaqing was gazing at the cloaked figure, her eyes radiating light. For the first time, she thought how captivating this man was.

Xu Qi'an said no more, carrying his wine jar as he slowly entered the arena, finally stopping beside the golden bowl. Then, he removed his hood and drank deeply.

The wine flowed down his chin, soaking his clothes. It was wild and carefree.

Suddenly, he smashed the wine jar to the ground, laughing heartily as shards scattered.

“\*Today heroes emerge from our ranks, spending years roaming the Jianghu deep. Chatting and scheming about grand ambition, yet nothing beats a drunken feast!\*”

Amid his wild, arrogant laughter, he leapt into the golden bowl.

At that moment, the entire arena fell silent.

After a long while, a sudden, overwhelming wave of cheers and clamour washed over the audience.

“The Great Feng will win!”

“The Great Feng will win!”

Such a high-key entry, line after line of poetry to be remembered throughout the ages, in an instant beat down the grandeur of the Buddhist sect, looking down on them from high above.

And restoring faith to the common people.

The civil and military officials slowly nodded their heads, showing expressions of praise and admiration. Such an act by Xu Qi'an had much deeper goals.

To rouse the spirits, and raise the banners.

Chapter 292. The Power of the Masses

Chu Caiwei pursed her lips, her bright almond-shaped eyes following that figure until he disappeared into the golden bowl. The big-eyed beauty still couldn't shake off the scene she had just witnessed.

\*So majestic...\* she thought.

"Young Master Xu is simply a divine being," the white-robed arcanists sighed in genuine admiration.

To them, such a display of grace and grandeur was too avant-garde, too innovative. It left an immense impact on their hearts.

In comparison, their Senior Brother Yang, who could only repeat his catchphrase, "There are none like me upon this land," seemed utterly lacking.

As this thought crossed their minds, both the white-robed arcanists and Chu Caiwei instinctively turned to look at Yang Qianhuan, only to see him trembling all over.

"So this... this is how it can be done... This is how it can be done... In front of countless people from the capital, before the great officials and nobles of the Great Feng, to drink boldly, to recite poetry with grandeur, and to face battle valiantly.

"Just imagining it makes my brain tremble. This... this is the extreme I have been pursuing, the feeling I desire... I never imagined he could achieve it so easily.

"No... this was my opportunity... my chance... Jianzheng... You... you... deceived me."

On the rooftop of a nearby tavern, Chu Yuanzhen sighed, "Impressive, truly impressive. This kind of showmanship can be said to be the pinnacle throughout history. Even when I succeeded in scoring the zhuangyuan in the Palace Exams, I wasn't this celebrated."

"Amitabha, this is why Sir Xu is a unique individual," Hengyuan said with a smile.

Sir Xu's personality was far more interesting than the rigid scholars and much more agreeable than the brash martial artists who resorted to violence at the slightest disagreement. This was likely one of the reasons why the oiran of the Jiaofangsi were so fond of him. It wasn't just his poems that attracted them, but his personal charm too.

"He's gone inside."

Amid the crowd, a commoner pointed towards the "painting" projected in the air. At the foot of the towering mountain, a cloaked figure had appeared.

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\*I'd give myself a 99/100 for that grand entrance, one mark docked for feeling awkward... But, if I pretend it wasn't awkward, then it's a flawless, gleaming golden performance... Occasionally indulging in some melodrama feels pretty good...\* Xu Qi'an thought, reviewing his showy performance while surveying his surroundings.

The world he entered felt as real as reality itself. Perhaps it was real—a small world created by the profound powers of a great Buddhist figure.

Before him was a towering Buddhist mountain, shrouded in clouds and mist, like a mystical realm beyond the mortal world.

Faint chanting echoed in the air, calming the heart and inspiring peace. It made one forget all worldly concerns, leaving only tranquility and joy.

Before him stretched a winding stone staircase, leading into the mist.

Xu Qi'an extended his senses for a moment but detected no signs of life—no insects, birds, or beasts.

"Monk Jingsi is guarding halfway up the mountain, so the first trial shouldn't be him. What could the first trial be?"

With this thought in mind, he began his ascent.

After walking for some time in peace, Xu Qi'an came upon a small stone tablet beside the stairs. On it were inscribed two characters: "Eight Sufferings."

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"The Eight Sufferings of life—birth, aging, illness, death, separation from loved ones, encountering enemies, failing to attain desires, and the suffering of the five skandhas...[^1]"

Master Du's voice, filled with compassion and empathy, echoed in the ears of the audience, "This first trial is the 'Eight Sufferings Formation.' Only those with firm resolve can continue the climb and be tested by further Buddhist teachings."

At the Bagua Platform, Emperor Yuanjing, clad in a Daoist robe, stood at the edge, overlooking the square. He asked solemnly, "I have heard of this formation before. Jianzheng, how powerful is this 'Eight Sufferings Formation'?"

"It's not about power; it's the kind of formation that wears you down," the Jianzheng replied, sipping wine as he explained to the emperor, "If a child were to enter the formation, they would easily walk out. The more one has experienced in life, the harder it is to break through. In Buddhism, this formation is used to temper the minds of monks."

"Some emerge with their hearts and minds more complete than ever, while others are shattered by the Eight Sufferings, their Buddhist heart destroyed."

Emperor Yuanjing immediately became serious. "Even high monks struggle with this formation. How can he possibly succeed?"

The Jianzheng chuckled, "How could competing with the Buddhists be so easy? Just a single 'Eight Sufferings formation'—there are few in the capital who could pass through unscathed."

The emperor's brows tightened upon hearing this.

If as the Jianzheng had said, the number of people who could make it through this formation was merely a handful, he didn't believe that Xu Qi'an would be counted within that group. This had nothing to do with talent but with one's heart, comprehension, and even the system they practiced.

How could a martial artist survive an formation meant to temper a Buddhist monk's heart?

If Buddhism advocated for an enlightened, pure heart, then martial artists were the opposite—rough and unrefined.

\*If we lose this battle, our alliance, which was once equal, will begin to tilt...\* Emperor Yuanjing thought.

That was his true concern. Compared to twenty years ago, the Great Feng had grown considerably weaker and could no longer compare to the Western Buddhist Sect. This was an unspoken truth, but if they lost this match, it would become an undeniable fact written into history.

Historians studying this era would conclude that in Emperor Yuanjing's later years, the Great Feng had declined in power, casting him not as a revivalist ruler but as an incompetent one.

"We cannot lose. No matter what, we must win. We have three chances. If Xu Qi'an fails, you must select a capable candidate for the next attempt," Emperor Yuanjing said coldly.

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"Is this formation really that terrifying?"

Chu Yuanzhen, having listened to Hengyuan's explanation, was shocked.

"With Xu Ningyan's temperament, I'm afraid he won't pass the Eight Sufferings test," Chu Yuanzhen muttered, deep in thought.

"Perhaps you should be a little more confident and drop the word 'afraid,'" Hengyuan replied helplessly.

"This 'Eight Sufferings formation' is used to temper the hearts of meditating monks. For warrior monks, it can cause their minds to shatter, leading to madness or even complete loss of reason."

"Is the Buddhist sect really this ruthless? Are they trying to destroy Xu Ningyan?"

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\*There is no fluctuation of energy, no sign of danger. The Eight Sufferings Formation won't attack me,\* Xu Qi'an stood by the stone tablet, hesitating to take a step forward.

\*Well, never mind. Let's break the formation first.\*

Xu Qi'an stepped onto the stone steps, entering the formation. In an instant, his surroundings changed. The sacred Buddhist mountain and steps faded, swallowed by darkness.

"Wah wah..."

He immediately heard the cry of a newborn, the sound tearing through the darkness. He saw white walls, white bedsheets, and a crowd in white uniforms.

A nurse was holding a newborn baby, carefully cleaning the child.

Lying on the bed was a woman with a pale face, drenched in sweat—her features delicate and all too familiar.

"Mum..."

Involuntarily, Xu Qi'an called out.

This wasn't the birth of Xu Qi'an of the Great Feng. It was the birth of Xu Qi'an, who had grown up under a banner of red, in a New China.

The child grew, enjoying a happy and carefree childhood before being forced into school. Day after day, year after year, schoolwork dominated his youth.

Finally, he made it to graduation, reaching adulthood, ready to step into society.

At this point, his noticeably aging parents patted his shoulder and said, with a hint of guilt, "You've finally graduated from the police academy. Your parents can't give you anything. You'll have to work hard yourself. Buying a house, a car, and getting married is all up to you."

He entered the workforce, working tirelessly day and night to save enough for a deposit on a house. After many years of grueling effort, he finally managed to make the deposit.

Then another problem arose—no money for renovations...

Xu Qi'an made a tough decision, leaving his job to go into business. After a failed venture, he spent the next decade struggling to get back on his feet.

Ten years later, he finally had a well-furnished home and some savings. It was time to start a family.

But then, his father fell ill... a serious illness that nearly drained him of all his savings. His father's health deteriorated, and Xu Qi'an had to take on the responsibility of caring for both his aging parents.

Because of this, his long-time girlfriend left him.

\*Isn't this where I should've died from drinking too much...\* He wanted to laugh at himself, but the weight in his heart only grew heavier.

The scene shifted. Before the age of forty, Xu Qi'an finally got married to a reasonably decent woman. The next year, they had a child. The couple quarreled endlessly over how to get their child into a better school.

From that moment on, they lived solely for their child, raising him, supporting his education, until one day the child said, "Mum, Dad, I'm getting married, but I need a house. My fiancée doesn't want to live with you two."

"Oh, and before that, you need to prepare a hundred thousand yuan or so for the dowry. Dad's retirement funds will do."

Fine, they thought. They would cut back on their own spending and give their lifelong savings to help their son with the mortgage. That's what life was all about, wasn't it?

So, their son got married, had a house, and began his own life. Then, a grandson was born. His wife moved in with their son to take care of him and his wife, leaving Xu Qi'an to live a solitary life.

The last scene of this life was him lying in a hospital bed, nearing death. In his final moments, only his equally aged wife was by his side.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an felt an unexpected sense of relief, as if he could finally rest.

One cycle ended, and another began.

From birth to death, his entire life had been spent as a cog in the machine, always working to "live." In his youth, he bore the weight of endless schoolwork. In his young adulthood, he struggled for his future. By middle age, he fought for his child. Even in old age, he was still working for his children.

Aside from those carefree childhood days, it wasn't until his final breath that he finally felt "free," as if he'd shed all his burdens.

\*So this is the Eight Sufferings of Life—birth, aging, illness, death, separation from loved ones, meeting those you hate, unfulfilled desires, and the burning of the five skandhas... What's the point of a life like this? This is not my life, not how it's supposed to be.\*

With each cycle, the urge to renounce worldly affairs and seek freedom grew stronger in Xu Qi'an's mind. A voice inside him kept saying:

Rest, rest. A life like this is meaningless.

Let go, and you will be free.

\*No, something is wrong... my will is faltering...\* He quickly realised that his thoughts were spiralling out of control, as if he were developing a split personality.

One voice tempted him to give up and seek freedom, while the other firmly held onto his beliefs.

The two sides clashed within him, causing Xu Qi'an to clutch his head in agony.

\*Think of something else... think of Fu Xiang's snow-white bum...\*

...

Every expression that he was showing was visible to the onlookers outside the formation, many of whom were deeply worried for him.

"What's happening? He seems to be in great pain, yet nothing appears to be happening to him."

The Eight Sufferings Formation worked on the mind, and outsiders couldn't perceive Xu Qi'an's inner struggles, so they couldn't empathise with him.

"This is only the first stage, and he's already suffering like this. How is he supposed to climb the mountain?"

A man from the Jianghu sighed. "The difference in skill is clear. This duel seems like a lost cause."

They didn't understand what the Eight Sufferings Formation was, only that Xu Qi'an had stepped into the "scroll," began climbing the mountain, and after only a few steps, ended up in this state.

It was disappointing.

In the royal pavilion, Princess Lin'an clenched her fists tightly, her entire body tense as she stared unblinkingly at Xu Qi'an, fully expressing the tension in her heart.

Huaiqing held a teacup in her hand, never once putting it down.

"Mother, Big Brother seems to be in great pain," Xu Lingyue said, her voice choking with tears.

Auntie quickly looked toward her husband, but saw his expression was deep as an abyss. She dared not ask him anything and instead whispered reassurances to Lingyue, "It's fine, it's fine. Your big brother is capable. He wasn't afraid of thousands of rebels in Yunzhou; why would he fear a few bald monks?"

"Uncle, what's happening to Big Brother?" Xu Lingyin asked, pointing at the sky.

"It's nothing."

Wei Yuan's voice was calm, but the veins bulging on the back of his hand, gripping the armrest, told another story. His body leaned forward involuntarily, his eyes never leaving the "scroll."

“The Eight Sufferings Formation!”

Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen snorted. “This formation is used by high-ranking Buddhist monks to temper their hearts. If a warrior falls into it and cannot break free, his spirit will shatter, leaving him as good as a cripple. If he passes the test, however, it shows that he has Buddha-nature. You’d then take the opportunity to bring him into your Buddhist order.

“Arhat Du’e is truly cunning. Such a blow to the Great Feng’s dignity—do they not fear our million-strong army?”

As the Prime Minister of the Great Feng, in the absence of the emperor, Wang Zhenwen was the one in charge.

He possessed broad knowledge and sophisticated political manoeuvring skills, and with just a few words, he laid bare the scheme of Arhat Du’e.

Master Du’e chanted a Buddhist mantra, speaking serenely, “Taking refuge in Buddhism is a form of fortune.”

Only then did Chu Yuanzhen realise another function of the Eight Sufferings Formation, and why Number Six, Hengyuan, had hesitated earlier.

Arhat Du’e’s plan was indeed quite insidious.

The first trial tested one’s Buddhist nature. If Xu Qi’an lacked it, he would be destroyed—no matter, for Buddhism would still win. But if he possessed Buddhist nature, more trials awaited, aiming to convert him. This way, Buddhism would not only win but also strike a humiliating blow to the Great Feng.

Sending someone to engage in a contest only to have them converted into a Buddhist disciple would be a slap in the face, delivered with maximum force.

The dignitaries in the various pavilions immediately turned pale, and even the previously nonchalant noblewomen and young ladies stopped their idle chatter, growing serious.

Biaobiao, suddenly anxious, widened her slightly upturned peach blossom eyes and urgently said, “Huaqing, Huaqing, the Prime Minister said if he can’t break the formation, running dog will be ruined. But if he breaks it, he’ll become a monk. What should we do?”

Huaiqing furrowed her elegant brows. Though she was well-read and knowledgeable, her cultivation was far from impressive, and the current situation was beyond her expertise.

“So, do you want him ruined, or turned into a monk?” Huaqing asked in return.

“I...” Biaobiao opened her mouth but couldn’t voice her true feelings.

It wasn’t just the dignitaries who were furious, but also the common folk. The commoners of the capital, living at the heart of the empire, took pride in being part of the Great Feng. Because of the recent provocations by the Buddhist monks Jingsi and Jingchen, resentment had already been brewing in their hearts. Today, with the Sitianjian agreeing to the contest with Buddhism, the area had been crowded with onlookers since before dawn.

“This is too much! The court is so weak, letting Buddhism walk all over us. Where are the experts? Why are they silent?”



One by one, gazes filled with tension and held breath locked onto Xu Qi'an.

Suddenly, Auntie heard a cracking sound—the sound of her husband's grip crushing the armrest of his chair.

She frowned, distressed. "Why did they pick Ningyan to enter the contest? What... what do we do now?"

Her husband had spent twenty years painstakingly grooming their nephew to build his foundation. If, as the old official had said, failing to break the formation would ruin Xu Ningyan, those two decades of effort would be wasted.

But even breaking the formation wasn't ideal. Xu Ningyan was the only heir of his branch. If he became a monk...

Auntie glanced back at her son and daughter. Xu Xinnian was furrowing his brows, and Xu Lingyue was biting her lip, her delicate face filled with worry.

...

"There is a third way to break this formation."

Amid the excruciating torment of his mental conflict, a voice entered Xu Qi'an's mind—it was the voice of Monk Shenshu.

"Do not respond, do not think about anything related to me. Just listen. This formation is designed to temper the heart and mind of Buddhist practitioners. For those who enter, there are only two possible outcomes: either their minds become clearer, or they are shattered.

"If you are not of Buddhism, yet you can endure the Eight Sufferings Formation, it signifies that you possess a Buddhist nature."

\*No wonder I felt the urge to renounce everything and join a monastery... This formation is meant to break my will...\* he thought while enduring the torment of his fractured mind.

Monk Shenshu's voice came again: "Apart from the two outcomes I mentioned, there is another way—break the formation with the power of the masses!"

Xu Qi'an waited for a moment, but Monk Shenshu said no more. Cautious, he did not call out to him in his mind.

\*The power of the masses? What does that mean? The Eight Sufferings of life... so does this require the strength of the masses to overcome? But where would I get such power? That's clearly not something a martial artist should possess...\*

The cycles of life continued, and the Eight Sufferings Formation continued to "corrode" Xu Qi'an's spirit. Worse, while his thoughts of renouncing everything had not intensified, the clash between the two "personalities" within him made his mental state grow increasingly twisted.

This meant Xu Qi'an truly lacked a Buddhist nature, and if he could not break the formation, his mind would be shattered.

Xu Qi'an reviewed all his techniques: the Heaven and Earth One Blade Slash, the Heart Sword, the Lion's Roar, the Face-Changing Technique, Nurturing Intent... \*hmm?\*

\*Nurturing Intent?\*

\*The technique Chu Yuanzhen taught me, where I use my own emotions to empower the sword...\*

\*My current emotions are terrible, but they aren't enough to break the Eight Sufferings Formation... But what if I change my approach? Why must I only use my own emotions?\*

\*Why not try borrowing the emotions of others? Using their emotions to nurture my sword intent?\*

Once this thought took root, it quickly blossomed.

Closing his eyes, he used the secret technique Chu Yuanzhen had taught him to sense emotions, but this time, instead of focusing inward, he turned his attention outward.

To his surprise, he sensed emotions from the outside world—those of the crowd watching in the capital. These emotions were like an ocean, filled primarily with tension and anger.

\*Are you all angry too?\*

\*Then lend me your strength.\*

Xu Qi'an submerged himself in the ocean of emotions, absorbing the anger. Gradually, an intense and boundless fury surged within him.

Like a wild tide, like thunder, like a raging fire.

Unconsciously, his hand pressed down on the hilt of his sword, as if ready to draw it.

"Not enough... it's still not enough..."

...

Qingyun Mountain, Cloud Deer Academy.

Suddenly, the statue of the Lesser Sage began to tremble, as waves of vast qi surged into the sky.

A red wooden box, suspended above the head of the Lesser Sage's statue, also began to tremble. Whatever was sealed inside seemed as though it wanted to break free.

As the pure light flickered, the Dean, Zhao Shou, appeared in the temple, staring in astonishment at the red wooden box.

Moments later, three beams of pure light flashed as the three great Confucians, Li Mubai and the others, arrived to investigate.

"What's happening? Why is the Lesser Sage statue moving again...?"

Li Mubai's voice abruptly stopped. He stared in disbelief at the red wooden box, stammering, "It... it's..."

Academy Head Zhao Shou said softly, "Someone has invoked the power of the masses, and it is awakening."

The three great Confucians looked at Zhao Shou as if he had gone mad.

Zhao Shou ignored them, bowing deeply. "Please, remain calm, venerable one."

The three great Confucians came to their senses and followed suit, bowing deeply. "Please, remain calm, venerable one."

The red wooden box's trembling subsided, and it gradually returned to silence.

...

"He's about to draw his blade!" someone rasped in the crowd.

Among the onlookers, there was a sense of relief. Xu Qi'an finally showed some action, no longer trapped in his pain. This settled the people, giving them peace of mind.

Having a plan of action was reassuring; the worst outcome would be losing without any resistance.

Wei Yuan was momentarily stunned, puzzled by Xu Qi'an's actions.

It wasn't just him—everyone who understood the Eight Sufferings formation was confused by what Xu Qi'an intended.

The Eight Sufferings formation wasn't an enemy. What good was drawing a blade? Was he planning to slash himself?

"Father, what's he trying to do?" Miss Wang asked quietly.

"He can't do anything," Wang Shoufu shook his head in disappointment. "The best outcome is if he can withstand the Eight Sufferings formation... I have no idea why the Jianzheng chose him."

From the tall building above, Emperor Yuanjing spoke in a low voice: "Jianzheng, is this the person you've chosen?"

To him, Xu Qi'an's actions seemed like a desperate move from a cornered beast.

"Your Majesty... have you felt nothing?" Jianzheng glanced at him, his eyes full of thinly veiled disappointment.

"Draw your blade! Draw it—" Biaobiao yelled out suddenly.

But before she could finish, she was stopped by Consort Chen, who rebuked her: "What racket, be proper."

"Why won't he draw it? Hurry up and draw the blade!" someone in the outer crowd shouted.

"Draw the blade!" another voice echoed.

Soon, more people joined in. The chant grew louder, and eventually, the calls for him to "Draw" filled the air like a tidal wave.

"Draw! Draw! Draw!..."

The voices crashed like waves.

...

"Enough!"

At that moment, Xu Qi'an drew his blade.

Sching...

In the serene Buddhist realm, a piercing light suddenly erupted. It was like the dawn breaking through the darkness, a beam of light splitting the chaos.

This light wasn't drawn from Xu Qi'an's strength, but from the united will of tens of thousands of commoners from the capital. The power of their solidarity.

Crack!

The stone tablet inscribed with the words "Eight Sufferings" was covered in cracks before shattering with a resounding bang.

Boom, rumble...

The entire Buddha Mountain trembled as if it were about to collapse.

This strike didn't just cleave the Eight Sufferings formation. The formation drew its power from the Buddhist realm, so this blade had sliced through the power of the entire realm.

Crack!

Another sharp sound echoed—not from the mountain, but from the outside world.

Master Du'e looked down in shock, noticing a crack had formed in the golden alms bowl.

"The golden bowl has cracked! It's cracked!" Biaobiao screamed, jumping up and pointing at the bowl, stomping her feet in excitement.

Her shrill voice echoed through the air.

Hearing her cries, the dignitaries in the pavilions instinctively lowered their heads to look at the golden bowl. Sure enough, they saw a crack running along its surface.

"What? The golden bowl has cracked?"

The common folk and the martial artists in the outer circle couldn't see the golden bowl clearly. Their hearts raced as they urgently sought confirmation:

"Is it true? Has the golden bowl really cracked? We can't see clearly."

Some of the martial artists at the front stood on tiptoes, shoving those around them to adjust their view. Finally, they caught sight of the golden bowl beside Master Du'e.

Peering intently, they saw a crack on its surface.

"It's true! The golden bowl has really cracked!"

With that confirmation, a wave of cheers surged through the crowd, louder and louder, cresting over itself.

"Damned monks, you think you're so strong! Hmph! Did you really think our Great Feng has no one capable of standing up to you?"

"Go back to the Western Regions! The capital isn't a place for you to throw your weight around!"

The crowd roared with joy.

While the commoners focused on shouting insults, the martial artists were more interested in Xu Qi'an himself.

Somehow, another brilliant young talent had emerged from the capital—someone no one had heard of before.

...

On the Stargazing Tower, Emperor Yuanjing watched the cheering crowds below, a smile spreading across his face.

“Not bad at all,” he remarked approvingly, then turned to ask, “Jianzheng, what was that blade? Since when has Xu Qi'an become so powerful?”

The Jianzheng ignored him.

In the pavilion, Miss Wang bit her lip and turned to her father, Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen, asking quietly, “Father, didn't you say he was sure to lose? You said the only way through the Eight Sufferings formation was to...”

“Enough, enough!” Prime Minister Wang hurriedly interrupted, waving his hand. “Father admits he misjudged the situation. Happy now?”

Despite his words, there was no trace of anger in his expression.

He relaxedly sipped his tea and added, “Wei Yuan has gained yet another fierce general.”

For the first time, there was a hint of frustration in his voice.

Back in the Nightwatchers' area, Wei Yuan exhaled slowly, gently patting Xu Lingyin's head. “That strike was decent. Adequate, I suppose.”

“Still,” he asked with a smile, “if it were any of you, could you have broken the formation with a single strike?”

The Gold Gongs lowered their heads in embarrassment.

Battle-obsessed Yang Yan couldn't help but ask, “How did he do it?”

Wei Yuan's expression froze slightly, then quickly recovered its usual calm demeanour. “You can ask him when he comes out.”

\*So, Duke Wei already knew...\* No wonder he's been so calm this whole time. Realisation dawned on the Gold Gongs.

The happiest person was still Xu Pingzhi, who beamed with joy, the complete opposite of his earlier state.

“Not bad at all,” the middle-aged woman muttered to herself.

That rascal was indeed impressive, she had to admit it.

Atop a nearby inn, Hengyuan sighed. “What an incredible strike... How did Sir Xu manage it?”

He turned to look at Chu Yuanzhen, only to find Number Four staring blankly, muttering repeatedly, “Impossible... impossible...”

It was as if he had gone mad.

What kind of impact had Xu Qi'an's strike delivered to make Number Four react like this?

Hengyuan was bewildered.

At that moment, Master Du'e's voice rang out, each word clear as it reached everyone's ears:

"The Eight Sufferings formation is only the first test. The second is the Vajra formation. This humble monk wonders, after unleashing such a strike, does this Silver Gong still have the strength to pass the second test?"

Upon hearing this, everyone immediately looked up at the "painting."

Xu Qi'an was sitting on the steps, gasping for breath, his face deathly pale.

Even ordinary onlookers with no knowledge of cultivation could tell that Xu Qi'an was in terrible condition.

It dawned on them that they had celebrated too soon. This was only the first test; he was still at the foot of the mountain, with a long way to go before reaching the top.

#### Chapter 293. Buddhist Allegories

Xu Qi'an's state was like a bucket of cold water poured over the crowd's hearts, causing the previously high spirits to fall, and the cheers to gradually fade.

"The monk halfway up the mountain, he's the one who sat on the Southern City's Heroic Platform for nearly a week."

"They say he's a Buddhist Unbreakable Vajra, and truly unbreakable at that. Over five days, many heroes and warriors challenged him, but none could break his golden body."

At this moment, the citizens of the capital, as well as the Jianghu folk from afar, recalled the fear they felt from being dominated by Jingsi's Vajra body. They remembered the strength of this delicate-looking monk.

Some citizens who weren't from the Southern City and were less familiar with the situation, asked around, and after hearing the explanation, they reacted intensely:

"Is this really true? Don't be taken in by hearsay—city gossip loves to exaggerate, and it's never reliable."

"It's no exaggeration. I even know that some days ago, a very powerful swordsman took action. They say he summoned stones to form a sword—a truly remarkable skill. But even he lost to this monk."

"The Buddhists are too powerful. Compared to them, it feels like our people are struggling and facing difficulty with every step."

The citizens of the capital felt deflated.

From Jingsi and Jingchen's matches and their lectures, to the appearance of the Dharma aspect last night, the Buddhists had made a deep impression on the capital's people, leaving them awed by their power.

...

"From what this poor monk recalls, Xu Ningyan's ultimate skill is 'One Blade from Heaven and Earth'. Yet does he have the strength to unleash another slash?" Number Six Hengyuan, shaking his head, clasped his hands together, sighing:

"The second stage, the Vajra Formation, is the true trial of combat. He only has the strength for one slash, but in the Eight Sufferings Formation, he has already exhausted his power."

Chu Yuanzhen couldn't help but laugh. "Number Six, you're too rigid in your thinking."

Hengyuan frowned, confused.

Chu Yuanzhen didn't answer and continued, "But unless he can deliver a second slash, one that could break through another Eight Sufferings formation, he won't be able to shatter Jingsi's golden body."

.....

Within the pavilion, an intense debate was unfolding.

"Resting to recover strength is possible—there's no time limit on this duel. As long as Xu Qi'an can unleash another slash as powerful as the last one, breaking through the Vajra Formation shouldn't be a problem," a nobleman expressed his opinion, immediately drawing opposition from others.

The one who refuted the Earl of Weihai was another noble, equally powerful in cultivation: "Do you really think that last slash was something a mere seventh-rank martial artist could produce?"

The gathered dignitaries and officials listened intently to the two men's arguments.

Biaobiao waved her hand, her crisp voice ringing out: "Earl Weihai, Earl Pingding, explain clearly. How likely is it that Xu Qi'an can break the Vajra Formation?"

Earl Pingding, a burly man in his early forties, stood up and cupped his hands. "Your Highness, in your servant's opinion, Xu Qi'an has no chance of winning."

Biaobiao frowned. "Why do you say that?"

Earl Pingding sighed. "Xu Qi'an is merely a seventh-rank martial artist, while Jingsi's golden body couldn't even be broken by Chu Yuanzhen. How could Xu Qi'an possibly do it?"

A civil official interjected, frowning. "Earl Pingding, you may not know, but Xu Qi'an, though a seventh-rank, is exceedingly strong. He has twice defeated sixth-rank Bronze Skin and Iron Bones."

Earl Pingding shook his head. "The Buddhists' Unbreakable Vajra Body cannot be compared to a martial artist's Bronze Skin and Iron Bones. Besides, that little monk has been stationed in the Southern City for nearly a week. If Xu Qi'an could win, he would have acted long ago. Why did he hold back?"

The civil official nodded in acknowledgment. Earl Pingding had participated in the great battle of Shanhai pass twenty years ago. His insight was not to be underestimated, and what he said was likely true.

Biaobiao thought for a while but couldn't come up with a rebuttal. She became frustrated and said, "Earl Pingding, how could you boost the morale of others while undermining your own? What benefit is there to you if Xu Qi'an loses?"

Earl Pingding responded helplessly, "Your servant is not trying to encourage others at the expense of our own. Xu Qi'an represents the Sitianjian in this duel, and by extension, the court. I too hope he wins, but... his chances are slim."

Most of the civil officials and female spectators were non-experts in martial matters. After witnessing Xu Qi'an's earlier slash breaking through the formation, their confidence had surged, and smiles had bloomed across their faces.

However, now that they'd heard Earl Pingding's analysis, they realized the situation wasn't as hopeful as they had initially thought.

Earl Weihai snorted and loudly said, "Earl Pingding, how do you know Xu Qi'an can't unleash a second slash?"

At that moment, Jingchen, who had been sitting silently in meditation the whole time, spoke, "That slash just now—surely it was the Jianzheng lending him power. Otherwise, how could a seventh-rank martial artist produce such a fearsome sabre energy?"

"A seventh-rank martial artist's physical strength is limited. How could he withstand the infusion of such power again?"

Earl Pingding shook his head, as if to say this was exactly what he meant.

The pavilion quieted down. The civil and military officials lowered their heads to drink, while the ladies deliberately turned away, avoiding looking at the monks.

They had no more to say, but their hearts were still filled with dissatisfaction.

"Father, what do you think?" Miss Wang, smiling brightly, looked at the Prime Minister.

Prime Minister Wang spoke calmly, "Watch more, say less. It's too early to make a final judgment now."

He believed Xu Qi'an had little chance of winning, his mind was already considering the next candidate. However, after being proven wrong once, the Prime Minister wouldn't make the same mistake again.

As a dignified Prime Minister, he wouldn't stumble in the same place twice.

"I've just had a thought," Miss Wang said with a smile. She glanced at Jingchen and raised her voice, "Master, the Eight Sufferings Formation is a tool for refining the Buddhist heart, unrelated to combat power. Even a high-ranked martial artist would struggle to break through it, is that correct?"

Jingchen nodded. "Rather than sending a high-ranked martial artist into the formation, it would be better to send in a child."

Miss Wang smiled brightly. "Master Du'e mentioned earlier that the court has three chances, correct?"

"Indeed."

Miss Wang's gentle, elegant face lit up with a radiant smile. "Now that the Eight Sufferings Formation has been broken, even if Xu Qi'an is exhausted and unable to pass the Vajra Formation, if the court sends a high-ranked martial artist to break through, can the Vajra atop the mountain stop them?"



Jingchen was momentarily stunned, then frowned and remained silent.

The eyes of the surrounding people brightened, as if suddenly enlightened, their thoughts racing.

None of them knew why the Jianzheng had chosen a seventh-rank Silver Gong for the duel, leaving them puzzled. Now, after seeing Xu Qi'an break the Eight Sufferings Formation and hearing Miss Wang clarify the situation, their thinking suddenly broadened.

"It turns out that Xu Qi'an is just a front-line pawn, right? Then shouldn't he step aside now? We could send a high-ranked martial artist to break the formation."

"Yes, there are plenty of high-ranked martial artists in the capital. Surely one of them could shatter the Buddhist Vajra Body."

"If we're talking martial artists, the Zhenbei King is undoubtedly the greatest of all in the Great Feng."

The topic gradually shifted to the Zhenbei King.

Miss Wang had taken the spotlight. She glanced casually towards the Nightwatcher area and noticed that Xu Xinnian was also looking at her. Her heart fluttered briefly.

But before their eyes could meet, she discreetly shifted her gaze.

"Was the person who spoke earlier a woman from the household of Prime Minister Wang? It seems like it was his daughter..." Xu Xinnian averted his gaze with disdain; his impression of the Wang family was poor.

This was because the Wang Clique and the Wei Clique were political enemies. The Wang Clique had persecuted his elder brother several times, and Xu Xinnian had already marked them as his future adversaries.

"The Zhenbei King has been praised as the most talented martial artist the Great Feng has seen in two centuries. It's a pity he isn't in the capital; otherwise, these bald monks wouldn't be so arrogant."

Xu Xinnian overheard the middle-aged lady nearby making her evaluation.

\*This woman is quite knowledgeable. Her insight isn't something an ordinary housewife would possess. I wonder where my brother met such a married woman\* Xu Xinnian mused.

"My big brother is also a martial arts prodigy," Xu Lingyue added.

The woman smiled but did not argue.

However, Xu Lingyue could hear the meaning behind the smile. It was the kind that dismissed any need to debate, like someone holding the truth, unwilling to bicker with someone who was clearly wrong.

...

On the Buddhist Mountain.

Xu Qi'an rested for a moment before continuing his ascent. He encountered no more obstacles and arrived directly before Monk Jingsi.

At this moment, Monk Jingsi's entire body seemed as if cast in gold, emitting faint glimmers of golden light.

Jealousy arose in Xu Qi'an's heart. \_If only I could learn this divine technique, my whole body would shine like gold...\_ His mind conjured up a phrase: \*"Indomitable Golden Spear!"\*

"Master Jingsi!"

Xu Qi'an stopped, sitting on the steps below, and asked, "Can I rest for a while?"

The young monk Jingsi, sitting cross-legged, smiled and nodded, "Please feel free to take your time, benefactor."

Xu Qi'an raised an eyebrow, "Aren't you afraid I might strike again?"

Monk Jingsi smiled, "At this moment, benefactor's meridians are burning like fire. Can you still endure that same energy?"

"It's not really a matter of endurance, it's just that the skill is on cooldown," Xu Qi'an grinned.

The body is like a vessel, and after withstanding an overwhelming external force, he was now in a 'post-power' phase. But this was only part of the reason—he couldn't summon the power of the masses again for now.

It was like he could only 'pick up money' once a day, and he'd have to wait until tomorrow to continue. Hence, the cooldown timer.

\*Using Number Four's secret method to harness the power of the people... the method must be just a means; the core issue lies with me. It's I who can summon the people's power... I suspect this is an upgrade of my strange luck... It's clear that Monk Shenshu knew about this ability of mine, and so must the Jianzheng...\*

\*I remember Shenshu once said that he and I are the same kind of person, and that's even why he parasitised my body... It's a little terrifying when you think about it.\*

Xu Qi'an pondered to himself.

"Master, did you enter the temple at a young age?" Xu Qi'an asked casually.

Monk Jingsi nodded.

"Do you practice Zen or martial arts?"

"Both Zen and martial arts," Jingsi replied.

\*Zen and martial arts together? This little monk's talent is quite remarkable...\* Xu Qi'an nodded and said, "I've heard that Buddhism emphasizes first entering the world before leaving it. You entered the temple as a child and never had a family. What world did you leave?"

Monk Jingsi, hearing Xu Qi'an's intent to debate Buddhist philosophy, remained wholly unafraid and said, "Leaving the world refers to cutting off worldly attachments and entering the temple. The Benefactor need not twist words.

"From a young age, this poor monk practiced Buddhism, travelled through the Western Regions, and experienced the suffering of the world, as well as the Eight Sufferings of life."

\_What nonsense about experiencing the Eight Sufferings! You've never dealt with house payments, car loans, or exorbitant dowries, and you're talking about the Eight Sufferings?\_ Xu Qi'an lampooned.

"Master, what do you think of women?" Xu Qi'an asked.

"A blade that cuts to the bone!" Monk Jingsi concisely evaluated.

"Such words are premature. You've never been with a woman. How do you know that women aren't the most wonderful thing in the world?"

Their conversation was heard by the crowd watching from a distance, word for word.

"Isn't this supposed to be the Vajra Formation? How did it turn into a discussion on Buddhism?"

"They're not discussing Buddhism—they're talking about women! This sir's words are like diamonds, they shine right into my heart."

The men all smiled knowingly.

The women blushed and quietly muttered under their breath.

"Goodness, how can running dog say such things!" The Second Princess's cheeks flushed, and she lowered her head slightly.

"Mother, Big Brother is becoming more and more improper," Xu Lingyue stomped her foot.

Auntie remained silent, feeling somewhat embarrassed.

Uncle Xu was both embarrassed and ashamed. \_What nonsense is this boy spouting in front of all these officials and noblewomen? This place is filled with dignitaries, and there are thousands of commoners watching. Some things are best left unsaid in such an atmosphere.\_

...

"Indeed, this poor monk has not experienced women, but female charm is as fierce as tigers. This has been passed down by generations of monks. Benefactor, please do not twist words to suit your argument," Monk Jingsi remained unshaken.

"As the saying goes: Without entering the tiger's den, how can one obtain the tiger's cub!"<sup>[^1]</sup> Xu Qi'an countered.

Monk Jingsi was taken aback. "What do you mean by this, benefactor?"

Xu Qi'an said nothing further.

"Without venturing into the tiger's den, how can one capture the tiger cub... what does this have to do with beauty?"

"Perhaps there is a profound truth hidden within that we simply cannot comprehend?"

The crowd outside felt a flash of doubt in their hearts.

...

"Well then, I have a few questions I'd like to ask master," Xu Qi'an stared at him, sneering: "Have you ever supported your parents? Have you ever worked hard to manage a household? Have you ever taken up a hoe to farm the fields?"

“Buddhism doesn't produce anything, spending all day reciting scriptures and chanting, relying on offerings from laymen to survive. Tell me, what scripture are you chanting, what Buddha are you calling?”

“To merely walk through the world as a bystander and claim to understand the sufferings of all beings? Of life's eight sufferings, you have only experienced birth, while the rest you've never encountered.”

"You're nothing more than a fake monk."

Jingsi was silent in contemplation for a long while before answering: "The Buddha sees all in the world, and naturally understands the suffering of the world."

"Good!"

Xu Qi'an nodded, drawing his black-gold long blade and slashing a deep, bloody wound on his arm. Clutching the wound, he looked at Jingsi:

"Master, do you think I feel pain?"

"The blade has touched your body, how could it not hurt?" Jingsi clasped his hands together.

"But do you know how much pain I feel?" Xu Qi'an asked again.

Jingsi remained silent. He had Vajra body, which blades could not penetrate, and indeed, he could not answer.

"Master, don't you understand yet?" Xu Qi'an sighed, "This is your so-called 'observation.' You know that I am in pain, but you do not know how much I am in pain. You know that the world suffers, but you surely do not know how deep that suffering runs.

"If you cannot even comprehend the suffering of the people, how can you possibly talk about delivering them from it? Isn't that a joke? Let me tell you a story."

Jingsi said nothing but adopted a posture of listening.

"One year, there was a great drought, and the people had no rice to eat. Countless starved to death. A young master from a wealthy family heard of this and was shocked. Do you know what he said?"

Jingsi asked, "What did he say?"

Xu Qi'an fixed his gaze on the young monk, a mocking smile spreading across his face as he enunciated each word clearly:

"Why. Not. Eat. Mincemeat?"[^2]

Jingsi looked as though he had been struck by lightning, his pupils dilating and his face going blank.

"Well said!"

"The young monk is at a loss for words! Look, the young monk has no response!"

The crowd outside erupted in cheers.

Monks were renowned for their skill in debate and rhetoric, able to make their words bloom like flowers, out-talking anyone. Yet here, Xu Qi'an's words had rendered the young monk from the Western Regions speechless.

It felt as if he had bested the Buddhist sect in the very area they excelled in most. From the perspective of the onlookers, the satisfaction was even greater than watching Xu Qi'an wield his blade.

Morale soared.

The officials in the court remained silent, observing. Breaking the Vajra Formation with words was impossible, but they were curious to see what Xu Qi'an's true aim was.

At this moment, Xu Qi'an tossed the black-gold long blade in front of Jingsi and said in a low voice, "Master, if you believe I am wrong, if you truly think you can understand the suffering of the people, why not experience it for yourself?"

Jingsi raised his head, murmuring, "Experience it?"

Xu Qi'an nodded, "Lay down your Vajra body, and cut yourself with the blade. Then you will understand my pain and comprehend the true meaning of Buddhism, rather than asking 'Why not eat mincemeat.'"

"No, no..." Jingsi shook his head, as if trying to convince himself not to attempt it: "If I dismiss my Vajra body, I will lose."

"A monk should let go of all earthly attachments, yet Master, you seem so attached to victory and defeat. You have already fallen to the lower path." Xu Qi'an gently coaxed:

"Losing a duel of skills, yet gaining a broader understanding of the world, experiencing the true Dharma—Master, weigh the importance for yourself."

\*A monk should let go of all earthly attachments, yet Master, you seem so attached to victory and defeat... "Why don't they eat meat porridge..."\* The young monk's expression grew increasingly complex, showing signs of inner conflict and struggle. Slowly, he reached out and gripped the black-gold long blade.

Xu Qi'an's lips curled slightly.

"I see now," Chu Yuanzhen praised, "Jingsi was raised in the Buddhist sect from a young age. While his understanding of the Dharma may be profound, he lacks the worldly experience and seasoning of the human realm. That is his weakness. Xu Ningyan truly is clever."

Jingsi was like the scion of a noble family, groomed in his clan from a young age, with the strength but lacking the maturity and experience born of hardship and trials.

"Amitabha." Hengyuan recited the Buddha's name, feeling a sense of melancholy.

He thought of his junior brother Henghui, whom he had raised by his own hand. Henghui too was a highly talented disciple of the Buddhist sect but had succumbed to worldly desires, leading to great tragedy.

\*Nicely done!\* The civil officials' eyes lit up, quietly applauding.

To conquer a city is lesser; to conquer hearts is greater. This move aligned with the art of war, perfectly executed.

Compared to brute force, Xu Qi'an's tactic of breaking the Vajra Formation in this way resonated much more with the civil officials.

They couldn't help but think once again: \*it's a shame he's not a scholar!\*

Instinctively, the next thought arose: \*Xu Pingzhi is an unworthy man!\*

Prime Minister Wang quietly nodded; Xu Qi'an's manoeuvre gave him a sense of clarity. This was a solution he hadn't considered before.

During the Tax Silver Case, he had not known about Xu Qi'an. It was only after the Sangpo Case that he started paying attention to this youth. He suddenly realized that this young man had limitless potential.

Unfortunately, he was under Wei Yuan's command. In the future, they could only be enemies, not allies.

At that moment, accompanied by the chanting of a Buddha's name, a voice echoed in the sky: "Jingsi, you are fixated on appearances."

As the voice rang in everyone's ears, it also reached inside the painting, resounding in Jingsi's ears.

The handsome young monk awoke from his trance, pulling his hand back as if shocked by lightning. He hurriedly clasped his hands together and chanted the Buddha's name repeatedly.

Gradually, clarity returned to his eyes.

"Bastard!"

Prime Minister Wang threw his cup to the ground and rose in fury, "Du'e Arhat, are Buddhists so incapable of accepting defeat?"

Behind Wei Yuan, nine Gold Gongs stood up in unison, gripping their sword hilts.

The monk Jingchen spoke calmly, "If the Jianzheng can secretly assist, why can't we?"

He was implying that Xu Qi'an's earlier strike had been aided by Jianzheng in secret or that some method had been implanted in him beforehand.

Prime Minister Wang sneered, "Is this world governed by the rules of your Buddhist sect? You claim the Jianzheng assisted, so did the Jianzheng assist."

The high officials and nobles wore expressions of anger, though they maintained their composure. But the crowd of onlookers and the unruly jianghu folk were far less restrained, shouting curses and even clashing with the imperial guards.

"Shameless bald donkeys, this is clearly cheating! We don't care, the Vajra Formation has already been broken."

"If the mighty Buddhist sect wins today's duel through this, we won't accept it."

...

Du'e paid no attention to the thunderous insults, glancing at Jingchen and saying indifferently, "You too are fixated on appearances."

"Junior acknowledges his mistake." Jingchen bowed his head.

...

\*The monks outside could hear the conversation between me and Jingsi... Is this even allowed? In a duel of both wit and strength, each side relies on their own abilities, but for the outside to forcibly interfere—this is too much...\* Xu Qi'an fumed silently.

He immediately stopped talking and sat cross-legged, regulating his breath.

A quarter of an hour later, Xu Qi'an opened his eyes, picked up the black-gold long blade, and sheathed it.

Gripping the hilt, Xu Qi'an announced loudly, "I will make only one strike. After that, all rests on fate."

His voice passed through the scroll, reaching the outside.

\*Only one strike?!\*

Whether an expert or an amateur, commoner or noble, everyone who heard this was astonished.

\*Was it just talk?\*

Xu Qi'an let all his emotions settle, gathered all his energy, and directed his internal qi to collapse inward. His \*dantian\* became like a black hole—an essential step in preparing for the one blade from heaven and earth.

\*Since you all are cheating, don't blame me for breaking the rules too...\* He closed his eyes, and his spiritual energy retracted as well, connecting to a massive well of blood and vitality within him.

It was the essence of the monk Shenshu.

On the journey back to the capital from Yunzhou, Xu Qi'an had absorbed this drop of blood essence, reviving himself with the power of an undying martial artist. However, part of that power still remained dormant within him.

The moment he saw Arhat Du'e allowing Jingsi to enter the formation, Xu Qi'an immediately realized that there was no way he could bypass this "Vajra." And with the invulnerability granted by the Buddhist secret realm, it was impossible for him to break through with his own strength.

At that time, while hiding in the Sitianjian, he communicated with Monk Shenshu. The Sitianjian, being the arcanists' domain, ensured that Arhat Du'e wouldn't detect it.

Monk Shenshu's suggestion was: channel the blood essence within you and unleash the residual power that couldn't be digested.

This power wouldn't reveal Shenshu's existence, as the monk had long stripped it of its "attributes" to allow Xu Qi'an to absorb its undying essence.

Now, it was purely the concentrated power of a martial artist.

The dormant strength within Xu Qi'an awakened, merging into his limbs and bones, transforming into raw qi.

Even though there was no wind within the Buddhist realm, Xu Qi'an's long hair started to move on its own. He remained with his eyes closed, like a dormant tyrant slowly awakening.

The heavens and earth seemed to tremble and shudder at his reawakening.

"What's going on? Am I seeing things, or is the world shaking?"

"It's the Buddhist Mountain. The Buddhist is shaking..."

Outside, someone suddenly cried out in alarm, "It's Xu Qi'an! He's about to draw his blade!"

No one was blind—they all could see that the tremors of the Buddhist Mountain were caused by Xu Qi'an.

"Amitabha!"

Jingsi formed a hand seal, remaining steadfast, but the mists within the Buddhist realm began to shift, raining down fine threads of golden light that merged into his golden body.

As a result, his golden body shone even brighter, radiating with countless beams of light, like a rising sun.

They were now evenly matched.

Huaiqing abruptly stood, stepping out of the pavilion to look up. Her eyes, reflecting the dazzling golden light, were fixed, her breath held.

More people stood up, stepping out of the pavilion, lifting their heads, and staring with wide eyes, forgetting to breathe.

Among them was Prime Minister Wang.

Wei Yuan rose slowly and strolled outside the pavilion, leisurely reciting, "One day I soared, the wind rose high, like a roc nine-thousand li."

\*Is this within your calculations too, Lord Wei?\* The Gold Gongs stared at his back.

Sching!

The sound of a blade being drawn echoed like thunder, reverberating through heaven and earth.

There was no blade in the world like this, so captivating, pulling at the hearts of countless people.

There was no blade in the world as resolute, as if determined to sever everything, willing to shatter like jade.

There was no blade in the world as fast, so fast that the naked eye couldn't follow it.

But the eyes of the people outside clearly saw the golden body shatter, the layers upon layers of golden light scattering like mist, driven away by the invincible blade intent.

This holy Vajra, unbeaten at the southern city for five days, this golden body that had haunted the citizens for five whole days, had finally fallen.

On the field, Xu Qi'an stood tall and proud.

Jingsi sat heavily on the ground, a deep blade wound running through his chest and abdomen, exposing damaged organs. His face was ashen, unable to maintain his meditative posture.



The fine threads of golden light gathered once more, flowing into his wound, healing his flesh.

"I told you, I would make only one strike," Xu Qi'an said calmly.

At that moment, the capital fell into silence.

For four or five seconds, there was absolute quiet. Then suddenly, a wave of sound erupted.

Some screamed, some cheered, and some were moved to tears, washing away days of frustration.

"My Great Feng is the true righteous ruler of Jiuzhou! The first in both governance and martial might!" A scholar shouted hoarsely.

"Xu the Poet is at the pinnacle of martial arts, the first under heaven!"

At this moment, everyone recalled the words spoken from within the mysterious realm: "I will make only one strike!"

It was only now that they understood the confidence and audacity within those words.

Emperor Yuanjing, standing atop the Stargazing Tower, faced the wave of sound, witnessing his citizens' rising passion and fervour.

"The Vajra Formation has been broken."

The old emperor revealed a genuine smile, "Jianzheng, you truly had confidence. Very good. Xu Qi'an is also very good, not unworthy of the court's nurture."

"Since ancient times, heroes have always been young..."

Miss Wang heard her father muttering softly.

\*Indeed, he is an extraordinary hero...\* Miss Wang thought. She scanned the area, noticing many familiar noble ladies staring at the proud young man standing on the steps of the Buddhist Mountain, their eyes filled with admiration.

Some of them were even middle-aged noblewomen, their gazes intense and unblinking, fixated on the youth with predatory eyes.

\*Even the top-ranking scholars weren't as dazzling as him,\* Miss Wang added silently in her heart.

\*Thump, thump, thump...\* Huaiqing heard her own heartbeat pounding like a drum, more intense than it had ever been in her twenty-plus years.

Even Xu Lingyue was slightly dazed, staring at her big brother, who was shining so brilliantly.

Auntie clicked her tongue and said, "Husband dear, after this duel, our door will be flooded by matchmakers... Dear?"

Xu Pingzhi's eyes were brimming with tears, his face full of appreciation.

\*Big brother is growing stronger and stronger, advancing relentlessly in martial arts. I can't fall too far behind either...\* Xu Xinnian secretly clenched his fist.

\*Even King Huai in his youth wasn't as dazzling as him,\* the older woman thought.

...

"Master, take good care of yourself."

Xu Qi'an sheathed his blade and continued his ascent.

He wandered through the mist-shrouded mountain forest for a while, before the path opened up. Before him was a sparse area of rugged rocks and sparse vegetation, with a towering Bodhi tree under which an old monk sat cross-legged.

Xu Qi'an knew this was the third trial.

And now, he was nearing the mountain summit.

\*Passing this trial, there would likely be one final challenge at the peak...\* Xu Qi'an put his palms together, "Master, what will this trial test?"

The old monk chanted a Buddhist mantra and said slowly, "The benefactor's heart is not at peace."

\*Starting with some old Zen sayings...\* Xu Qi'an mentally grumbled, then asked, "Why must it be peaceful?"

"When the heart is at peace, there is Dharma. When there is Dharma, there is Buddha. With Buddha, one can transcend the sea of suffering," the old monk replied.

"Why transcend the sea of suffering?" Xu Qi'an countered.

"Why not transcend?" the old monk shot back.

"Why transcend," Xu Qi'an retorted.

"Why not transcend," the old monk said again.

...

"What are they talking about?"

"They're discussing Zen allegories. You don't understand."

"You understand? Then explain it to me."

"Of course not. If I could understand it, I would be a high monk. But it's precisely because I don't understand it that there's hidden meaning in it."

"I see."

The crowd outside whispered to each other, each reacting differently. Some frowned, carefully chewing over the dialogue in search of deeper meaning. Others nodded or shook their heads, acting as if they had grasped something profound.

And then, everyone, from royal kin to common folk, heard Xu Qi'an say:

"Master, honestly — I was just spouting nonsense at you. Let's speak plainly now."

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Chapter 294X. \*Mahayana\*

"All things in the world have heart. If one holds compassion, and resonates with the hearts of all things, then why be restricted by the words of man?"

The old monk clasped his hands together, remaining calm and unperturbed by Xu Qi'an's words.

\*Then why the hell are you speaking to me in the Great Feng Mandarin rather than a western region language eh?\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself, then said bluntly:

"Let's cut to the chase. How will we compete? Don't waste my time with philosophical nonsense."

"You are too attached to appearances. Why must there be a competition?" The old monk smiled faintly.

"It was clearly your Buddhist sect that proposed this competition. Isn't your unreasonable behaviour a disgrace to the face of Buddhism?" Xu Qi'an frowned.

"Moments ago, you mentioned at the mountainside: 'A monk should let go of all earthly attachments.' If all earthly attachments are gone, then what is 'face'?" The old monk's face remained serene as he slowly spoke.

"Fine, then how does master plan to test me?" Xu Qi'an held back his impatience.

He began to feel troubled. Worse than a person who always argues is someone who doesn't speak like a normal person. An arguer will at least cling to your words to counter-argue, but someone who doesn't talk sense will ignore everything you say and only speak their own lines. If you can't understand, it's your problem. But even if you try hard to understand, it's pointless, because they'll still ignore you.

"Life itself is a form of cultivation. By entering this secret Buddhist realm, you are also cultivating," the old monk smiled.

"How should I cultivate? Please, master, enlighten me."

"Cultivation depends on the individual. Why ask me?"

\*Cultivate your mother's c\*\*\*! Fine, you don't want to speak sense? I'm done with this.\* Xu Qi'an suddenly felt a surge of anger, turned around, and began to walk away.

But a barrier blocked his path.

"I have an idea," Xu Qi'an sneered, gripping the hilt of his sabre, "I wonder if a master who claims to renounce all worldly things can take just one of my strikes?"

"Amitabha, then let us try,"

The old monk lowered his gaze, his voice calm. "I am but a remnant fragment of thought left behind by Bodhisattva Wenyin before attaining enlightenment."

\*Bodhisattva Wenyin, a first-rank Bodhisattva?!\*

Xu Qi'an's expression didn't change as he released his grip on the saber. "Master, where were we in our conversation just now?"

The old monk replied honestly, "You asked if I could take one strike."

"Master!"

Xu Qi'an harshly scolded, sitting down cross-legged across from the monk, clasping his hands together in mock prayer, and criticising him:

"Is the Buddhist sect only about fighting and killing? Does your sect rely on violence to save all beings? Master, let's actually get onto the same page."

...

"Did Running Dog... just wimp out?" Lin'an whispered, turning to look at Huaiqing.

Huaiqing shot her a sidelong glance, her expression cool, her tone even, "He merely changed his strategy. The \*Art of War\* says: the highest form of generalship is to balk the enemy's plans. The same applies in a duel."

Lin'an suddenly understood, thinking she had been narrow-minded. Running Dog wasn't scared; he was wisely changing his approach.

\*He was just scared... Lin'an, you're just too gullible!\* Huaiqing shook her head, glancing pityingly at her younger sister.

Upon hearing that the opponent was a remnant of a 'Bodhisattva', Xu Qi'an wisely de-escalated the situation. This move surprised many of the spectators.

That was incredibly astute.

However, this act made his image more vivid and entertaining. At least among the noblewomen, they found this Silver Gong quite amusing and interesting.

"He certainly knows how to adapt. If he had tried to solve this through violence, he would have certainly lost," Nangong Qianrou snorted coldly.

\*This kid...\* The Gold Gongs shook their heads helplessly, some finding it amusing but aware that the setting was inappropriate for laughter.

Sometimes, it felt like Xu Qi'an wasn't a martial artist at all, able to back down without any pressure or psychological burden. Yet, paradoxically, he was also an outstanding martial arts prodigy.

"Father, what's the hidden challenge of this round?" Yang Yan asked.

The Gold Gongs all looked at Wei Yuan, awaiting his answer, as if assuming Wei Yuan, though not an insider of Buddhism, would somehow know what the third round entailed.

Wei Yuan ignored them.

At this moment, from the royal pavilion, a girl in a fiery red palace dress cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, "Hey, baldies, what's the challenge for this round? Is it an Old-Monk formation?"

The girl had a round face and watery peach-blossom eyes, giving off a seductive and alluring aura at first glance.

Although Arhat Du'e did not want to respond, since the one asking was a princess, he explained out of courtesy, "In the third round, there is no content."

This statement left all the dignitaries present astonished.

"What do you mean by 'no content'?" Lin'an slammed the table with both hands, expressing her dissatisfaction.

Arhat Du'e simply shook his head, smiling without elaboration.

The Gold Gongs suddenly realised the truth. No wonder Wei Yuan hadn't said anything—there was no real challenge in this round. But how could they win if there was no content?

In the midst of everyone's confusion, Huaiqing spoke, her clear voice as crisp as jade clinking together, pleasant and substantive:

"An untitled challenge?! Does this mean that no matter how Silver Gong Xu responds, the Buddhist sect can either refuse to acknowledge it or deem it invalid, trapping him in the secret realm until he admits defeat?"

Her words woke the crowd from their reverie.

In various pavilions, civil and military officials' expressions shifted.

Upon closer reflection, they realised it was true. No matter how difficult a challenge might be, as long as there was a set goal, it could be overcome.

But the most frustrating and unsolvable dilemma was a challenge with no content. The Buddhist sect could always veto Xu Qi'an's approach, whether he chose martial combat or a battle of wits.

The Buddhist sect was perpetually in an invincible position.

"This is nothing but trickery! If you want a competition, then lay out the terms. Whether it's a battle of wits or strength, you Buddhists can make the call. What is this nonsense?"

"A win through trickery isn't an honourable victory."

"Prime Minister Wang, His Majesty is not here. You should speak up."

One hot-tempered military officer slammed his cup in anger, pointing at Arhat Du'e and the others, cursing them openly.

Whether in a battle of wits or martial prowess, they weren't afraid. The capital was filled with experts; both sides could compete based on their abilities. But this third round was a dead end. If Xu Qi'an couldn't solve it, could anyone else?

"What's going on? The officials in the pavilion seem very angry."

"It sounds like they're accusing the Buddhist sect of cheating?"

"How did the Buddhist sect cheat? Ugh, it's killing me not to know—does this third round have some hidden trick?"

Amidst the murmurs, a man from the Jianghu spoke up with a solemn expression, his voice loud and clear: "Everyone, I overheard just now. Here's the situation..."

Martial artists had been hearing, and although the common folk couldn't make out the conversation, those near the front could hear it clearly. Immediately, the hidden trick in the third round was revealed to all.

"Shameless!"

A scholar exploded in fury, "I've studied for over a decade, yet I've never encountered such despicable behavior. For the dignified Buddhist sect to resort to such vile tactics just to win a duel—it's truly disgraceful."

"Could it be that they're afraid of our Scholar Xu's sabre skills and thus deliberately use such underhanded means? In any test or contest, one should face it openly. A person should not, or at least cannot..."

"Even the imperial examinations have questions!"

The commoners, now riled up, began to vocally condemn the Buddhist sect's shamelessness. They cursed, wishing they had rotten eggs and vegetables to throw at the monks.

Thanks to Xu Qi'an's earlier display of skill, the commoners had shifted their view from "the Buddhist sect is formidable" to "the Buddhist sect is nothing special."

This shift in confidence and pride was something Xu Qi'an had instilled in them.

Now, seeing the Buddhist monks setting a trap to sabotage Xu Qi'an, the commoners were enraged and began to push against the imperial guards, as if ready to rush in and take down the bald monks themselves.

"Amitabha, no question is also a question. Life is full of uncertainties, will there always be a 'question' at every turn?"

Arhat Du'e's serene voice spread across the venue, carrying a calming force that seemed to soothe the hearts of the masses, making them momentarily quiet and feel he had a point.

It was the power of a seventh-rank monk—a Dharmacarya.

Not just the commoners but even the nobles in the pavilions restrained their anger, nodding slightly in acknowledgment.

"Shameless!"

Suddenly, an indignant shout broke the silence.

Everyone turned toward the source of the voice and saw a handsome, unfamiliar scholar descending from one of the pavilions. He walked calmly into the square, sneering at the monks.

"No wonder you monks are bald. Turns out it's because you've stuffed your heads with filth! On the outside, you appear virtuous, but inside, you're full of corruption. Disgraceful!"

Monk Jingchen furrowed his brows. "This benefactor..."

"Who's your benefactor? This Xu won't give you even a single copper coin. You go around calling everyone benefactor—shameful!"

"You..."

"You what? You monks sure are brash, are you also all just figments of the Buddha's pre-enlightenment delusions,?"

\*Figments of the Buddha's delusions?!\* Jingchen was taken aback, then flew into a rage. This was outright slander!

"Benefactor, as a scholar, speak only in insults. Is this the virtue of the scholars of Great Feng?"

"I never insult people—all those I insult are not people."

The monks' faces darkened with anger, their eyes glaring daggers at Xu Xinnian.

“What? Not happy? You monks came all the way here to challenge us, and the Great Feng, being a land of courtesy, only sent a Silver Gong to meet you. That alone was showing you respect.

“But who knew your faces are thicker than the walls of the capital. No wonder the battle at Shanhai Pass was won twenty years ago—it was thanks to your thick-skinned faces. Even after ten years, the allied armies of the southern and northern barbarians couldn’t breach the defenses of your faces.

"And you all act like you’re unaware of this. No matter how much you look in a mirror, you’ll never get it."

"How dare you!"

Monk Jingchen stood up abruptly, his robes billowing as his eyes blazed with the fury of a wrathful vajra, his aura intimidating.

Xu Xinnian, undaunted, snickered. "What a fine master empty of worldly desires—empty my fucking arse, pah!"

Monk Jingchen's expression froze.

Arhat Du'e spoke calmly: "Jingchen, your mind is disturbed."

Monk Jingchen’s face went pale, and he slumped back down, hands clasped in prayer, his voice trembling. "Your disciple has become too attached."

The Western Buddhist delegation had arrived with the intent to exact retribution, already harbouring anger. After two rounds, Xu Qi'an's triumph had placed immense psychological pressure on the monks.

Now, Xu Xinnian’s sudden insults slandering their very moral character — even a Buddha would feel a flicker of anger, so how could these mortal disciples not?

Xu Xinnian scoffed and walked back to his seat.

All eyes were on him, filled with a mixture of surprise and admiration. His words might have been uncouth, but they were satisfying. He’d rendered the monks speechless with his scathing remarks.

That felt good!

Moreover, the nobles, who prided themselves on decorum, would never dare to say such things in public, making Xu Xinnian the mouthpiece of their inner thoughts.

\*Smart!\* Lady Wang silently praised. She saw through Xu Xinnian’s strategy. The insults were merely a façade; his true goal was to unsettle the monks, deliberately provoking them to break their focus and leave them vulnerable to a decisive blow.

Not only did he vent their frustrations, but he also dealt a heavy psychological blow to the monks.

Additionally, Lady Wang speculated that Xu Xinnian's bold move served another purpose—to showcase his talents before the capital’s nobility and perhaps even the Emperor himself, laying the groundwork for a promising future after the imperial exams.

"He has some wit."

At that moment, Lady Wang heard her father, Wang Zhenwen, comment in a calm voice.

A smile bloomed on her lips.

\*What a thrill!\* Xu Xinnian returned to his seat, immensely satisfied. Indeed, there's nothing more exhilarating than hurling insults.

The little interlude over, the contest resumed, though the crowd outside still felt a heavy weight in their hearts.

...

Under the Bodhi tree, Xu Qi'an sat facing the old monk, discussing the Dao. He nodded along, going "Mm-hmm, ah yes," saying, "Master's words are indeed profound, enlightening me greatly," while in reality, he was pondering the solution to the third trial.

The Buddhists were truly cunning. This round had no explicit question, meaning the right to interpret it lay entirely with the Buddhist monks. Would they let him win?

The answer was obvious: no.

How to break the stalemate? After careful thought, Xu Qi'an devised two strategies: first, to convince with reason; second, to convince with reason.

\*In my current state, I can't even muster a second slash. Even if my energy were restored, without the support of... it would be impossible to break the barrier.\*

The old monk in front of him was a fragment severed by Wenyin Bodhisattva before attaining enlightenment. Thus, the first "convincing with reason" needed to be carefully thought through.

The second "convincing with reason" meant using any means other than physical force to deal with the old monk.

If he dealt with the old monk, this trial would be broken.

\*There's no way I can out-argue him on Buddhist teachings. This old monk is a fragment of thought of a Bodhisattva, far beyond the level of a novice monk like Jingsi. He can only deceive me, never the other way around... How do I deal with him?\* Xu Qi'an pretended to listen to the sermon while plotting his response.

"Master, you mentioned you are a fragment of thought of the Wenyin Bodhisattva. What thought is that?" Xu Qi'an suddenly asked.

"The highest state of Buddha," the old monk replied.

\*The highest state of Buddha... Starting with such a profound topic. I had hoped to tackle the obsession itself, but it seems that's not possible... Wait, perhaps I should first hear what he has to say and then see if my 'keyboard warrior' knowledge can offer any loopholes!\*

Xu Qi'an followed up with another question: "What is the highest state of Buddha?"

The old monk remained silent for a long time before saying, "I don't know. But Wenyin believed it was the Buddha. And so he severed me off, cutting off this obsession. From that moment, his heart was as clear as glass, free of mortal stains, and he attained the Bodhisattva path."



Upon hearing this, Xu Qi'an fell silent. He knew little of this world's Buddhist teachings, but had some understanding of Buddhism from his previous life. However, there were significant differences between the two.

The most obvious being that in this world, there was no Buddha Tathagata, only a Buddha.

“Why is the highest state of Buddha the Buddha? Does that mean other Buddhas are not true Buddhas?” Xu Qi'an frowned and asked.

At that moment, a detail occurred to him: in the Buddhist hierarchy, second-rank are Arhats, first-rank are Bodhisattvas, and above that is the transcendent Buddha.

There seemed to be no other Buddhas.

The old monk answered, “Buddhism has the Arhat phala, and the Bodhisattva phala. Only the Buddha attains the supreme phala. Thus, the Buddha is the highest state of Buddha, a unique existence. The Buddha is the Buddha, and there is only one.”

“There is nothing to say that Arhats and Bodhisattvas cannot attain the supreme phala,” Xu Qi'an said.

The old monk glanced at him and shook his head. “You are not of the Buddhist sect, so it’s understandable you don’t comprehend the phala.”

Xu Qi'an adopted a disciple’s posture, clasping his hands together. “Please, Master, enlighten me.”

\*Please let me freeload more Buddhist knowledge.\*

“Do you know why Bodhisattvas are Bodhisattvas and Arhats are Arhats? In Buddhism, fourth-rank are \*Sadhu\*, ascetic monks, and such individuals must make a great oath.

“The size of the oath is closely tied to their \*phala\* — the fruit of their achievements. Those who vow monumental oaths attain the Bodhisattva phala, while those with lesser oaths attain the Arhat phala. Furthermore, the Arhat phala is divided into three levels: Executioner of Evil, Non-returning, and Grand Arhat.

“Once a phala is condensed, it cannot be changed nor improved.”

Xu Qi'an was stunned, remaining silent for quite some time. The amount of information in those words was overwhelming, and it took him several minutes to fully digest it.

\*So Bodhisattvas and Arhats are essentially unrelated. They are both advancements from fourth-rank Sadhu... Wait, after fourth-rank is second-rank or first-rank, so what about third-rank Vajra?\*

\*Fourth-rank Sadhu skip over the third rank and directly achieve Arhat or Bodhisattva phala... Does this mean the third-rank Vajra belongs to a different Buddhist system?\*

Xu Qi'an's mind sparked with realisation, forming a new theory: eighth-rank warrior monk—third-rank Vajra!

\*What the... Eighth-rank directly jumps to third-rank? The Buddhist system is so strange, it doesn't follow a gradual promotion path at all.\*

Reviewing the Buddhist hierarchy, Xu Qi'an suddenly understood many things.

\*In Buddhism, from ninth-rank to first-rank, the eighth-rank warrior monk corresponds to the third-rank Vajra. No wonder Master Hengyuan, despite his formidable combat prowess, was only an eighth-rank warrior monk—because his next rank would be a Vajra.\*

\*Moreover, no wonder second-rank is Arhat, first-rank is Bodhisattva, and the Buddha is above even that, in the beyond-rank category. The reason for this naming convention is that once a phala is determined, it cannot be altered.\*

\*So in this world, unlike in my previous one, where there are numerous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, there is only one Buddha: the Buddha.\*

\*The world respects only one Buddha... Wait a minute, fuck, this is Theravada Buddhism!\*[^1]

\*I know how to break this trial!\*

Xu Qi'an slowly rose to his feet, fixing his gaze on the old monk. His lips curled into a smirk, which gradually grew into a wide grin, until it erupted into full-blown laughter.

“Hahaha...”

He laughed so hard his body bent forward and backward, laughing wildly and arrogantly.

“What’s he laughing at? Has he gone mad?”

The crowd outside looked up in confusion at Xu Qi'an, who stood beneath the Bodhi tree, laughing uncontrollably.

“Is he about to admit defeat...?” someone asked worriedly.

The Buddhist monks frowned slightly, unsure of the reason behind Xu Qi'an's outburst.

In the pavilion, the civil and military officials, the noblewomen, the Imperial Guard, and everyone present showed expressions of bewilderment.

Those who were familiar with Xu Qi'an felt a surge of concern, fearing that something had happened to cause him to act so erratically.

Emperor Yuanjing, standing beside the Jianzheng, looked up at the laughing figure in the painting with a frown. He glanced back at the Jianzheng, only to find that the Jianzheng had stopped drinking, now watching Xu Qi'an with a solemn expression.

Wei Yuan tapped his fingers unconsciously, gazing at the Buddhist Mountain without saying a word.

...

“What is the benefactor laughing at?”

Under the Bodhi tree, the old monk voiced the question on everyone’s mind.

Xu Qi'an clutched his belly, struggling to suppress his laughter. His expression became arrogant and insolent as he said, “I’m laughing at the narrow-mindedness of Buddhism and the hypocrisy of the Buddha.”

\*Arrogant!\*

The old monk's face darkened with anger, and the Bodhi tree began to sway even though there was no wind.

Outside, Arhat Du'e, who had remained expressionless throughout, finally frowned. If even Du'e reacted this way, there was no need to mention the rest of the Buddhist monks.

But Xu Qi'an's next words extinguished the old monk's raging anger under the Bodhi tree.

"Master, you claim not to know the highest state of Buddhism? Then allow me to tell you!" His voice was firm and powerful.

Golden light flashed in the old monk's eyes.

"I once believed that Buddhism was profound and that every Arhat and Bodhisattva was a person of great compassion. But now I realise they are nothing more than selfish individuals. It turns out your Buddhist sect practices Hinayana Buddhism,<sup>[^2]</sup>" Xu Qi'an declared loudly.

Hinayana Buddhism?!

This unfamiliar term had never been heard before, and while it sparked anger among the monks, it also piqued their curiosity. If there was \_Hinayana\_ Buddhism, did that mean there was \_Mahayana\_ Buddhism as well?

"Hmph, what Hinayana Buddhism? He's clearly spouting nonsense just to belittle our Buddhist sect."

"What does a martial artist know of Buddhism? How dare he declare such unfounded distinctions of Mahayana and Hinayana? Senior uncle, this man is insulting our Buddhist sect and cannot be easily forgiven," the monks rebuked Xu Qi'an angrily, certainly not admitting to his statement

...

"Are you saying that I—"

"Master, where do you hail from?"

"The Western Regions."

"And why do Buddhist monks cultivate?"

"To attain phala and transcend the sea of suffering."

"This is Hinayana Buddhism. Cultivation solely for oneself, even attaining phala is for self-gain, benefiting oneself but not others," Xu Qi'an said.

The old monk was taken aback. This time, he fell into deep thought for a long while and, surprisingly, did not become angry. Instead, he asked, "The benefactor claims this is Hinayana Buddhism. Then, what is Mahayana Buddhism?"

“You are not a monk of the Western Regions; you are a monk of Jiuzhou, a monk of the entire world. A monk’s cultivation should not be for personal liberation but to help all beings in the world escape the sea of suffering.

“Four hundred years ago, why did Confucianism seek to extinguish Buddhism? They weren’t destroying Buddhism; they were destroying Hinayana Buddhism.

“Hinayana Buddhism is ultimately limited to one sect and one school. Only Mahayana Buddhism can save all beings. So, what is Mahayana Buddhism?”

The old monk’s breathing quickened, and his eyes, once indifferent and serene, were now turbulent. His voice trembled as he asked:

“What is Mahayana Buddhism?”

Outside, the Buddhist monks stared intently at Xu Qi'an, their breathing also becoming rapid.

“Why is there only one Buddha?” Xu Qi'an questioned.

All the monks, including the old monk, suddenly felt their breath catch.

Arhat Du'e stood up abruptly, as if he already knew what Xu Qi'an was going to say.

Taking a deep breath, Xu Qi'an slowly said, “All beings in the world are Buddhas. Across the three worlds and ten directions, there are countless Buddhas. This is Mahayana Buddhism. Why should there be only one Buddha in this world?”

It was like a bolt from the blue!

\*All beings are Buddhas....\* The old monk sat petrified, as if turned to stone.

“All beings are Buddhas, all beings are Buddhas... Mahayana Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism... If it were Mahayana, and all beings were Buddhas, could Confucianism still have destroyed Buddhism?” Monk Jingchen muttered to himself, as if his life’s beliefs had been shattered and his Buddhist heart suffered a tremendous blow.

“I’ve been practicing Hinayana Buddhism, I’ve been practicing Hinayana Buddhism... Hahaha... So, all beings can become Buddhas. Yes, all beings are Buddhas. This is Mahayana Buddhism...”

Suddenly, a monk went mad. He rushed into the crowd, his expression wild and crazed.

His Buddhist heart had shattered.

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Chapter 295. A New School of Thought

Arhat Du'e clasped his hands together, and a sound like the ringing of a morning bell echoed: "Clear away all vexations, and the Buddha heart shall be serene."

The crazed monk seemed as if struck by a heavy blow, his movements stilled. Then, he slowly sat down, crossing his legs in meditation. Though his face still bore traces of inner struggle, he no longer appeared consumed by madness.

Arhat Du'e withdrew his gaze and lifted his head to look toward the Buddha mountain in the mystical realm. His weathered face, rarely expressive, now showed an unmistakable anger.

...

\*This really is a fragment of obsession left behind by a Bodhisattva. I merely proposed a vague concept, yet he seems to have inferred a lot from it!\*

\*In Jiuzhou, the Buddhist sect seems to place more emphasis on power and attaining Phala rather than on true Buddhist teachings... Perhaps it differs from the Theravada of my world, but it certainly falls short of Mahayana.\*

\*At the very least, they have no concept of Mahayana Buddhism.\*

Seeing the old monk standing in stunned silence, appearing to have grasped some insight, Xu Qi'an figured that he had likely passed this stage.

"What just happened? Why did that monk suddenly go mad...?"

"Could it have been something that Silver Gong said earlier?"

"Could mere words have such power? Don't talk nonsense."

The common folk had no understanding of the terms "Mahayana Buddhism" and "Hinayana Buddhism," so they were perplexed by the monk's sudden madness. Not everyone had heard the monk's mutterings just before he lost control.

At this moment, the old monk suddenly smiled with profound enlightenment, his body radiating an aura of Buddha's wisdom.

"Thank you, benefactor, for clearing my doubts. I have achieved complete understanding," the old monk said, smiling and clasping his hands together.

\*You really achieved enlightenment?! I can't believe that with just a few random words, I helped a great monk achieve full realisation...\* Xu Qi'an felt conflicted.

Before he could respond, the old monk continued, "When Wenying was still a fourth-rank Sadhu, he was puzzled as to why he could not become a Buddha.

"This obsession lingered in his heart for countless years. As his life was nearing its end, he finally realised that there is only one Buddha in the world, and that is the Buddha himself. So, he cleaved me from his mind, and attained the Phala of a Bodhisattva.

"I have sat in this secret realm for many years, unable to comprehend how to become a Buddha or why I could not."

The old monk gazed intently at Xu Qi'an, but it was as though he was looking past him to see himself in the distant Western Regions. Finally, he clasped his hands together again and said to himself:

“I am Buddha, and Buddha is me. Amitabha!”

Wenyin's obsession had been to transcend his rank and become a peer to the Buddha.

Now, he had finally realised that becoming a Buddha had nothing to do with ranks.

“Thank you for your guidance, benefactor.”

“Master, you have attained enlightenment through your own nature; this is not due to me,” Xu Qi'an replied sincerely.

While his words had triggered the monks' enlightenment, it was his vast experiences and deep contemplation that made the clouds scatter, and all become clear.

It was just like the brief conversation earlier—ordinary people heard it with no particular reaction, but to the monks, it was like the ringing of a great bell. They understood immediately, and it resonated deeply within them, expanding into a greater realisation.

Suddenly, a breeze stirred within the secret realm, and the old monk dissolved into a wisp of azure smoke, disappearing without a trace.

\_Shashasha...\_

The Bodhi tree swayed, and green Bodhi fruits appeared, hanging heavily from its branches.

These fruits emitted a radiant green glow, and anyone could tell at a glance that they were extraordinary.

The Buddha realm was utterly silent, with only the faint rustling of the Bodhi tree. However, outside the realm, the crowd was growing noisy.

By this point, the people of the capital were not just shocked—they found the whole situation utterly incredible.

If they hadn't misheard or mis-seen, it appeared that this Silver Gong had guided the old monk into enlightenment. In gratitude, the monk had even thanked him.

A martial artist, enlightening a high monk and allowing him to attain complete realisation?!

Such an absurd and bizarre scene left the people of the capital utterly speechless.

“What on earth did he say?”

On top of a restaurant, Chu Yuanzhen asked Master Hengyuan, who was standing beside him.

“Like seeing flowers through mist... Like seeing flowers through mist... Sir Xu, please explain it more clearly... explain it more clearly...” Master Hengyuan muttered as though in a daze.

\*Xu Ningyan's words have had such a profound impact on the monks of the Buddhist sect?\* Chu Yuanzhen was astonished.

...

\*Have I passed this stage?...\* Xu Qi'an felt a flicker of joy, though he was reluctant to leave the sight of the lush green Bodhi fruits.

Better head to the temple at the mountain's peak first, he thought.

Just as he turned to leave, a booming voice echoed throughout Buddha Mountain.

"What is Mahayana Buddhism, and what is Hinayana Buddhism? Benefactor Xu, please explain before you go."

Outside, everyone turned in surprise to look at Arhat Du'e. No one had expected an esteemed Arhat to intervene in this contest of minds.

But at this moment, Arhat Du'e's expression was so serious, so grave, that it made people feel as though the sky was about to collapse. No one dared to raise their voice or reprimand him.

\*What exactly are Mahayana Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism?\*

\*We don't understand any of it.\*

The common folk were confused, but among the upper echelons of power in the capital, some were starting to grasp a little of what was going on.

Such as Wei Yuan, such as Prime Minister Wang.

\*That's Arhat Du'e's voice... It seems the outside world can indeed hear my words and see my actions. But why would he directly intervene in this debate?\*

Xu Qi'an frowned and let out a cold snort. "Master, may I ask, what is a Buddha?"

"Before the Buddha, for 720,368 years, no one became Buddha. After the Buddha, for 3,491 years, no one became Buddha.

"The Buddha is the Buddha. How could all people become Buddhas?"

Arhat Du'e's voice carried an interrogative tone.

\*So, in this world, the Buddhist sect has existed for 3,491 years. But why hasn't the concept of Mahayana Buddhism emerged here?\*

Xu Qi'an pondered for a moment and came to a conclusion: In the world of Jiuzhou, strength reigns supreme, and cultivation ranks are paramount. Whoever has the strongest fist is the one in charge, which has stifled the development of different schools of thought.

\*In my world, by contrast, we are all ordinary mortals. It's the clash of ideas, not power, that drives growth.\*

\*A difference in environment makes a difference in development.\*

\*Since that's the case, I'll explain what Mahayana Buddhism is... or at least my understanding of it,\* Xu Qi'an thought before responding in a serious tone:

"So, in the eyes of the Buddhist disciples of this world, Buddha is the Buddha, but the Buddha is not Buddha. To me, this idea is utterly laughable."

This statement was so convoluted that, aside from the Buddhist monks outside, no one understood it.

Monk Jingchen couldn't help but interject, "What's so laughable? You must explain clearly."

Arhat Du'e glanced at him, said nothing, and shifted his gaze back to Xu Qi'an.

"Of course it's laughable. Take the Arcanists of the Sitianjian as an example: the Jianzheng is a First-rank Arcanist, but First-rank Arcanists are not the Jianzheng. This is a universally accepted fact, right? Yet, in your Buddhist sect, you equate Buddha with *the* Buddha. Isn't that absurd and strange?

"Shouldn't 'Buddha' represent a supreme Phala, rather than just one individual?"

Such words were nothing short of blasphemy. The Buddha was the founding patriarch of the Buddhist sect, the only Buddha, the one they worshipped.

An exalted, god-like figure — shouldn't they indeed be the only Buddha?

But Xu Qi'an's words held a certain logic, which left the monks speechless for a moment.

Xu Qi'an continued, "So, I would like to ask the master, what exactly is Buddha? Is it merely a way to gain power, or is it a way of thought?"

Arhat Du'e's expression remained stern, but his eyes softened, no longer angry. After a moment of serious thought, he replied, "Both."

"That's why I say, this is where the distinction between Mahayana Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism lies," Xu Qi'an stated firmly.

The monks below exchanged confused glances, itching to hear the entirety of Xu Qi'an's theory.

In the Stargazing Tower, on the Bagua Platform, the Jianzheng's eyes widened as he mumbled to himself, "That son of a bitch dares say anything! This is bad, this is really bad..."

The Emperor Yuanjing turned and asked, "What did you say, Jianzheng?"

The Jianzheng smiled, "Your Majesty, Xu Qi'an has given you a grand gift."

Yuanjing frowned, puzzled.

But the Jianzheng offered no further explanation.

Wei Yuan slowly stood up, his hands clenched into fists under his long sleeves. It seemed he had come to a realisation.

"Remarkable..." Prime Minister Wang muttered under his breath.

*\*Remarkable?!\** Miss Wang looked over, surprised, wanting to ask, but seeing her father so focused, she swallowed her curiosity.

"At present, in the Buddhist sect, strength is paramount, and rank is utmost. Every cultivator of the Buddhist path ultimately seeks to achieve phala, whether Arhat or Bodhisattva. In short, they seek to free themselves from samsara. As for freeing all sentient beings, that comes secondary. Master Du'e, am I correct?"



Arhat Du'e remained silent for a long while before pressing his hands together in acknowledgement. This was his tacit agreement.

"Therefore, with strength paramount, rank utmost, and the Buddha as Buddha, I call this Hinayana Buddhism." Xu Qi'an gazed at the sky and declared loudly:

"Master Du'e, esteemed monks, am I wrong?"

A monk objected, "If this is Hinayana Buddhism, then what is Mahayana Buddhism? Are you saying it's that 'everyone can become Buddha' nonsense? That's absurd."

"You find it absurd because you practice Hinayana Buddhism, which fundamentally esteems rank above all; benefit for oneself. But what if instead the heart is utmost?" Xu Qi'an posed.

"The heart is utmost?" Arhat Du'e murmured the phrase, pressing his hands together. "Please enlighten us, benefactor."

"In your view, there is only one Buddha, the Buddha himself, and people cannot become Buddhas—they can only attain Bodhisattva or Arhat Phala. But, don't forget—was the Buddha born as a Buddha?" Xu Qi'an expounded confidently.

"I believe everyone has Buddha-nature; it's just obscured by the mundane world's impurities. But through cultivation, one can see their true self, and thus, everyone can become a Buddha.

"Master, to see self is to see Buddha!"

Boom!

Suddenly, a bolt of thunder cracked across the sky, accompanied by a faint sound of chanting.

Everyone was shocked to see that Arhat Du'e's entire body began to glow with a golden light, resonating with the strange phenomena in the heavens.

In the Buddhist sect, this signified a moment of enlightenment.

"To self is to see Buddha, to self is to see Buddha..." Arhat Du'e was immersed in a profound state, his mind drunk in the revelation.

A voice echoed within him: \_Why is the Buddha, Buddha? Why can't I be Buddha?\_

\*No,\* everyone \*can become Buddha.\*

This Buddha was not the rank of Buddha in cultivation, but rather, an inner Buddha.

Xu Qi'an's words, though they might seem merely reasonable to outsiders, struck Arhat Du'e—a long-time practitioner of Buddhism—like a thunderclap.

\*Is Buddha truly determined solely by power?\*

\*Can Buddha truly only be the Buddha?\*

\*How narrow-minded is such thinking!\*

If this were the case, then "Buddha's light shining across Jiuzhou" would be nothing more than an empty phrase. Only if everyone could become a Buddha would Buddha's light truly illuminate the world.

This was the true essence of Buddhism.

The Buddha represented the pinnacle of the Buddhist system, but Buddhist teachings should not be confined to the Buddha alone.

The concept of Mahayana Buddhism had emerged, a new school of thought was born...

...

The other monks did not achieve enlightenment, but each had their own realisations, and some even felt a sense of clarity, glimpsing different aspects of Buddhist teachings and new philosophical heights.

Among them, Master Jingchen was the most deeply affected, completely enthralled.

In the Nightwatcher sector, the Gold Gongs suddenly heard a soft chuckle from Wei Yuan, who had stepped out from the pavilion.

"Enlightenment... what wonderful enlightenment!" Wei Yuan said, word by word.

"Brilliant, simply brilliant!" Prime Minister Wang stroked his beard with a smile.

\*What does this mean? Why are these two high-ranking officials finding amusement in this? Was Arhat Du'e's enlightenment something to be happy about?\*

The Buddhist sect was an ally of the Great Feng, but tensions were high, and there was ongoing rivalry and contests of power. They were, in a sense, half-enemies.

To the civil and military officials, this was certainly not something to celebrate.

Atop the Stargazing Tower, on the Bagua Platform.

Emperor Yuanjing burst into laughter, a joy that he had never experienced before.

"Xu Qi'an has introduced the concept of Mahayana Buddhism. If Arhat Du'e hadn't achieved enlightenment, that would be one thing. But now that he has, when he returns to the Western Regions, he will undoubtedly promote Mahayana Buddhism.

"This will inevitably create a conflict between the doctrines of Mahayana and Hinayana. Debates will be the least of it; once a split occurs... hahaha."

He hadn't laughed so heartily in years.

Only when powers are balanced can they be true allies. When one side grows stronger while the other weakens, the relationship inevitably turns superficial.

This was the current state of affairs between the Great Feng and the Buddhist sect. The frontiers of the Great Feng were being harassed by the southern and northern barbarians, while the Buddhist sect stood by, watching.

If the Buddhist sect were to split, both factions would vie for the Great Feng's support, allowing the Great Feng to increase its status and gain much benefit.

"Jianzheng is right; this truly is a grand gift. Well done. Xu Qi'an's gift has greatly pleased us."

In the pavilion, many nobles raised their heads in surprise, looking toward the Sitianjian tower.

"Is that His Majesty laughing?!"

"Why would His Majesty be laughing? What's so amusing about this? Strange. Duke Wei and Prime Minister Wang are behaving oddly, and now so is His Majesty."

...

"Mahayana Buddhism... Mahayana Buddhism..."

Monk Hengyuan was lost in a trance, muttering, "I too can become a Buddha. Warrior monks can also become Buddhas. Everyone in the world can become a Buddha. To deliver all sentient beings, to know that seeing one's self is to see Buddha."

"What did running dog say?" Biaobiao widened her eyes, looking at Huaiqing. She knew something important had happened but didn't understand, so she turned to the knowledgeable Huaiqing for an answer.

"I don't know exactly what he said, but I do know what the consequences will be," Huaiqing replied.

"Consequences?" Biaobiao blinked her peach blossom eyes.

"From now on, the Buddhist sect will be divided into Mahayana and Hinayana," Huaiqing said with a hint of a smile.

At the same time, Xu Erlang explained to the Gold Gongs, "From now on, the Buddhist sect will be divided into Mahayana and Hinayana."

The Gold Gongs' eyes widened. No further explanation was needed; they already understood the implications of Xu Xinnian's words.

They also understood why Duke Wei had laughed.

Jiang Lyuzhong was overwhelmed with excitement, his voice trembling with joy, "This... this... the Buddhist sect is in trouble. What has Xu Ningyan done? What has he done? Hahaha."

\*With just a few words, he has divided Buddhist teachings into Mahayana and Hinayana... Xu Ningyan had done something truly monumental. Duke Wei, is this all within your calculations?\*

The plain-looking woman's eyes suddenly gleamed. She despised the Buddhist sect, hated it even, more than one could imagine. That's why she had specifically sent a sixth-rank martial artist to challenge Monk Jingsi.

Her aim was to suppress the Buddhist sect's arrogance.

Unfortunately, her subordinates had not lived up to her expectations. Not only did they fail to achieve anything, but they also became stepping stones for the opposition.

Today, she had mingled with the Nightwatchers to watch the contest, partly for the excitement but mainly to see the Buddhists falter, to watch them lose in the duel.

Xu Qi'an had not yet won, but this surprise alone was enough to make her roll with joy on her bed at home.

\*He truly is capable...\* the woman thought to herself.

At this moment, among the nobles, some were beginning to grasp the deeper implications, each of them widening their eyes as if they had just seen a stunning beauty undressing and waiting on a bed.

The shock and delight were impossible to hide.

When the civil and military officials looked at Xu Qi'an again, their gazes had changed. Although he was a member of the Eunuch Clique and naturally loathsome, they had to admit that he never failed to surprise.

Whenever he was involved, things were somehow much more reassuring.

Chapter 296. I will not Kneel

After the crack of thunder echoed through the sky, silence followed. The swirling clouds dispersed, and at the same time, the Buddhist radiance on Arhat Du'e's body retracted.

He opened his eyes, and a flash of wisdom shot from his gaze, only to be withdrawn in the next instant.

Arhat Du'e saw his Buddhist disciples, silent in thought, having entered a unique mental state. In Buddhism, this was the process of enlightenment.

Eyes see, ears hear, and the mind realises.

Of course, this was still a far far cry from Master Du'e's own great enlightenment.

Arhat Du'e did not interrupt his disciples' comprehension. He clasped his hands together and said loudly, "The Sage once said, 'Learning knows no age; those who attain, achieve.' This is an ultimate truth.

"Although Benefactor Xu is not of the Buddhist sect, you possess great Buddhist roots, which have enlightened this poor monk, elevating my thoughts. This precisely validates the truth that all people have a Buddha-nature, and by seeing oneself, anyone can become a Buddha.

"Thank you, Benefactor Xu, for enlightening me on the Mahayana Dharma. Benefactor Xu, you are worthy of being my teacher. You have won this third trial."

The profound Buddhist teachings were beyond the understanding of commoners, but they extracted the core message from Arhat Du'e's words:

Benefactor Xu is amazing, Benefactor Xu is my teacher, and Benefactor Xu has passed the third trial.

"Just now, did that high monk from the Buddhist sect say that Benefactor Xu is worthy of being his teacher?" A man in the front row, dressed like a scholar, stammered.

\*My teacher?\*

The Jianghu martial artists among the crowd became excited.

For a long time, martial artists had been looked down upon by other systems. Martial strength violated laws, and crude warriors were seen as nothing more than violent brutes who caused destruction and killed people.

Apart from being useful in war, they had no other purpose. In fact, they were seen as a destabilising force in society.

But now, a dignified high monk of the Buddhist sect, a second-rank Arhat, had actually said that a martial artist should be his teacher.

To the Jianghu folk, these words were immensely uplifting, making them want to shout to the heavens.

"The entire Jianghu of the Great Feng should remember the name Xu Qi'an. He is a true warrior."

"At last, the martial system has produced someone capable. I've roamed the Jianghu for many years, and I've never seen a martial artist be respected as a teacher by the pinnacle of another system."

"When I return to my hometown, I'll make sure everyone knows. Coming to the capital this time wasn't in vain—I've seen something incredible."

"Indeed. When I return home and drink with my friends and family, I'll be able to talk about this for three days and three nights... I'm suddenly eager to return."

In one corner, a still-elegant aging woman reluctantly withdrew her gaze from Xu Qi'an and turned to her prized disciple, the Soul-stealing hand Rongrong.

"Rongrong, I've made inquiries. This Sir Xu... is a frequent visitor to the Jiaofangsi."

Rongrong, with her heavily made-up yet not trashy features, bit her lip and looked back at her teacher. "Master, what are you implying?"

"We Jianghu folk don't care about status," the woman said quietly. "Rongrong, with your beauty, it might be difficult to become Sir Xu's wife, but becoming his concubine wouldn't be a problem."

"I..."

Rongrong wanted to refuse, but that man was too dazzling—so dazzling that even someone like her, who prided herself on her beauty, couldn't help but feel a little moved.

...

Xu Qi'an ascended the steps, encountering no further obstacles along the way, until he reached the small square outside the temple at the top of the mountain.

It was a standalone temple with a single-ridged roof and upturned eaves. There were no side halls or annexes, only the main hall.

\*The temple should hold the final trial. I remember Arhat Du'e saying that if I still refuse to convert to Buddhism after entering the temple, then the Buddhists will have lost...\*

Instantly, Xu Qi'an recalled the 108 techniques taught by the Jiaofangsi courtesans, using them to pollute his thoughts, letting his mind become tinged with the exclusive desires of the royal family.

Satisfied with his transformation into a shameless degenerate, he nodded approvingly and pushed open the temple doors, stepping inside.

...

Seeing this, Arhat Du'e clasped his hands together and said, "Once inside this temple, even a stone can be enlightened and converted to Buddhism."

What did he mean by this?

The crowd frowned upon hearing this, then remembered the theme of this duel: conversion to Buddhism.

The Western Region's delegation not only wanted to win the Disc of heavenly secrets, but also to have the duelist convert to Buddhism, severely undermining the Great Feng's prestige.

"Filthy monk, We demand to see what's happening inside the temple!" Biaobiao's usually playful and coquettish eyes suddenly revealed a rare fierceness, as she angrily declared, "Who knows what dirty tricks your Buddhist sect has set up inside to harm our Silver Gong!"

She didn't believe Xu Qi'an would just join the Buddhist sect, but the Buddhist methods were mysterious, and forceful conversion was possible. Unable to see what was happening inside, her mind kept conjuring worst-case scenarios of Xu Qi'an being coerced.

She could no longer restrain herself.

"Since this is a duel, it should be conducted openly and fairly. Arhat Du'e, please reveal the scene inside the temple for us to see," Huaqing said coldly.

The nobles under the pavilion also began to voice their agreement.

"Indeed!"

With a smile, Arhat Du'e clasped his hands together and, with a wave of his wide sleeves, switched the Buddhist realm's view. The crowd saw the flickering candlelight in the temple's grand hall.

Inside the hall, a sixty feet golden statue sat cross-legged, its head nearly touching the ceiling.

This Buddha statue had thick, drooping earlobes, a round face like a golden plate, and half-closed eyes. It wore a compassionate smile, yet exuded an indescribable majesty that reached into the soul.

Merely looking at it made one want to clasp their hands together and offer their prayers.

"There are two manifestations of Dharma in the temple. This one is the Vajra Dharma Aspect. Benefactor Xu, the secret of the Diamond Sutra lies within this golden body. If you can comprehend it, you can cultivate the Indestructible Vajra Body of Buddhism."

Du'e Master's voice transmitted into the hall.

\*The Diamond Sutra is hidden within this Dharma aspect...\* Xu Qi'an's eyes lit up. He had long coveted the divine Vajra body ability of Buddhism. If he could master this protective divine skill, he would be invincible in the sixth-rank warrior realm.

Moreover, with this skill, Xu Qi'an would overcome his last major weakness. After unleashing his mighty strike and becoming exhausted, he could toss aside his blade, lie on the ground, and tell his enemies: "Come at me, do it yourself."

\*No wonder the Jianzheng insisted I represent the Sitianjian in this duel... Jianzheng, was this all part of your plan?\*

Xu Qi'an was both excited and chilled at the same time. The Jianzheng was truly terrifying.

Outside, after hearing the words of Arhat Du'e, the gathered martial artists' eyes lit up with excitement. They raised their heads, gazing intently at the Buddha statue as though they wished they could glue their eyes to it.

Xu Qi'an sat cross-legged on the prayer mat, head raised, scrutinising the Vajra Statue.

Meanwhile, Arhat Du'e was watching him. The Vajra Body was only suitable for warrior monks, and Zen monks who had not reached the Arhat level could not master it.

Arhat Du'e was offering Xu Qi'an an enticing bait, laying the groundwork to draw him into the Buddhist order.

To Arhat Du'e, this was not just a matter of cherishing a rare talent, but also because Xu Qi'an was the originator of Mahayana Buddhism. Arhat Du'e wanted to be the one to establish and spread these teachings. To better promote the Mahayana doctrine, it was essential to have Xu Qi'an, the trailblazer of these ideas, join the Buddhist sect. This was crucial to legitimizing their "orthodoxy."

\*The Diamond Sutra is supposedly hidden in the statue? What nonsense... there's nothing here at all.\* Xu Qi'an stared at the statue for a full fifteen minutes without blinking, until his eyes started to ache.

\*I really am just a crude martial artist without a Buddha nature...\* He mentally mocked himself.

Suddenly, a warm current surged in his abdomen, rising from his Dantian, passing through the middle Dantian, and entering the upper Dantian. His brow pulsed, as if a thin plastic film had been stretched and then broken.

The statue before him began to change...

Though the Buddha statue remained seated and motionless, a profound aura of Zen spread around it, becoming visible to Xu Qi'an.

Surprisingly, he understood this Zen energy, and he comprehended the Buddha's aura contained within the Dharma Statue.

\*Is it... helping me?!\*

The thought flashed through his mind, and Xu Qi'an unconsciously adjusted his posture, joining his hands in prayer, his eyes half-closed, mirroring the statue.

This process lasted for an unknown amount of time. Suddenly, a spot of golden light appeared at the center of his brow, rapidly spreading like an invisible brush sketching over his body.

In a matter of breaths, Xu Qi'an's entire body was covered in radiant gold, transforming him into a golden statue himself.

...

Arhat Du'e was utterly stunned.

"He—he's transformed into a golden body?!"

"Has he truly converted to Buddhism?"

Seeing this, the commoners nearly broke down, their faces instantly falling as if they'd been deflated. Their previous joy and pride evaporated, leaving them utterly dispirited.

This man had navigated the three trials, bringing great honor to the Great Feng and making the people of the capital proud. But now, it seemed he had been "converted" by the Buddhist sect.

This move by the Buddhists hit hard, and the blow was ruthless.

"The Unbreakable Vajra! He's mastered the Unbreakable Vajra!" A sharp voice suddenly burst from the crowd.

The speaker was a man dressed as a Jianghu warrior. He pointed excitedly at Xu Qi'an, his lips trembling with excitement.

"What Unbreakable Vajra? Isn't he converting to Buddhism?"

The people around him hurriedly asked.

"Of course not! Not only has he not converted to Buddhism, but he's also mastered one of the Buddhist sect's divine skills—Unbreakable Vajra!" The martial artist explained, his hands gesticulating wildly as he laughed hysterically:

"Stealing a chicken but losing the bait! Haha! Haha! The Buddhists tried to lure him, but failed! This Silver Gong is a peerless genius, an absolute prodigy.

"Given time, he may very well surpass the Zhenbei King and become the top martial artist of the Great Feng!"

The crowd erupted in a tidal wave of noise, the commoners, who did not understand cultivation, breathed a sigh of relief and began laughing again.

It turned out that their young Great Feng genius had not converted to Buddhism but had instead mastered the Buddhists' invincible golden body.

"Given time, he may very well surpass the Zhenbei King..."\* In the same area, a woman standing next to Xu Xinnian's wife pricked up her ears, raising her head to gaze at Xu Qi'an with a complicated expression.

\*Nonsense. How could anyone in the Great Feng surpass the Zhenbei King in martial arts?\*

In the same region, the nine Gold Gongs all felt a bitter envy. Despite being as strong as Fourth-Rank martial artists, they too coveted the Unbreakable Vajra Technique. In a battle where strength was evenly matched, the one with the tougher body would prevail.

\*Unbreakable Vajra...\* Wei Yuan frowned, then smiled.

He didn't care about the deeper meaning; as long as Xu Qi'an could continue advancing in martial arts, he was content with turning a blind eye.

The civil officials were less impressed, as martial arts wasn't their domain, though they marvelled at Xu Qi'an's terrifying natural ability. The military officials, however, stared wide-eyed, their envy directed not just at Xu Qi'an, but at Wei Yuan as well.

Such an outstanding martial talent, and Wei Yuan had claimed him.

"Father, after today, people may stop calling you unworthy." Xu Xinnian said softly.

A pleased Uncle Xu turned his head and asked, "Why?"



"Because you raised an elder brother who is a martial arts prodigy," Xu Xinnian smiled. "From now on, all martial artists will praise you."

"Hahaha!" Xu Ershu burst out laughing.

Xu Lingyue puffed out her developing chest, proud and radiant, sharing the glory—this was her elder brother.

"Hehe!" Lin'an giggled happily.

"Don't celebrate too soon. There's still one more Dharma aspect to go," Huaqing said in a serious tone.

On the rooftop of the restaurant, Hengyuan sighed in admiration, "The divine Unbreakable Vajra..."

"It's settled," Chu Yuanzhen slapped Hengyuan's shiny head with a laugh. "Ask Xu Ningyan for the Unbreakable Vajra Technique when this is over. With it, your path as a warrior monk will go further, and reaching the third-rank Vajra level won't be impossible."

The conversation between the old monk and Xu Qi'an had been heard by everyone outside. With Chu Yuanzhen's wisdom, it wasn't hard to deduce that the next rank for an eighth-rank warrior monk would be third-rank Vajra.

Amidst the cheering, Arhat Du'e chanted a Buddhist scripture. His voice, tinged with a smile, spread through the crowd:

"This trial is called \*Asura's Heart."

\_Asura's Heart\_?

The commotion quieted down, and all eyes turned from the Buddhist scene back to Arhat Du'e, including Wei Yuan, Prime Minister Wang, and even Emperor Yuanjing from the top of the Stargazing Tower.

"This is a tale from our Buddhist sect..."

Arhat Du'e began to tell the story.

It was said that when the Buddha first founded his teachings in the Western Regions, the land was ruled by a barbarian tribe known as the Asura. They were a savage, bloodthirsty people, who ate raw meat and drank blood. They mercilessly slaughtered the Buddhist monks in their quest for territory.

After learning about the situation, the Buddha personally went to the Asura tribe's territory and meditated for three days and nights. During this time, he neither resisted nor retaliated, allowing the Asura tribe to attack him.

The savage Asura immediately assaulted him with weapons. With the first strike, his skin split, and blood gushed out, but from his flesh came a metallic sound. With the second strike, his flesh again tore apart, and golden light began to shine from within. After 3,600 strikes, the Buddha shed his mortal flesh and revealed his golden Dharma body.

The Asura, during these three days and nights of continuous assault, finally attained enlightenment. They let go of their savage nature, renounced violence, and converted to Buddhism.

The crowd of onlookers, common folk from the streets, listened intently to the tale. However, high-ranking officials like Prime Minister Wang and the hereditary nobles turned pale.

Though the Buddha wasn't physically present in the temple, this trial, named "Asura's Heart," was bound to have a similar effect as the Buddha's enlightenment of the Asura tribe.

If even the ferocious, bloodthirsty Asura could be enlightened, how could this not work on Xu Qi'an?

Inside the temple, the once closed eyes of the Vajra Dharma statue suddenly opened. In that instant, the might of Buddhism crashed down like a mountain, like a tidal wave, engulfing Xu Qi'an with an overwhelming force that was impossible to resist.

Xu Qi'an saw boundless Buddha light, but instead of bringing peace, this light felt tyrannical, oppressive. It instantly crushed his will and altered his heart.

\*Life's eight sufferings are meaningless. Joining Buddhism is the only true path...\*

\*I am the pioneer of Mahayana Buddhism. This is where I belong.\*

\*Why hesitate? Are you really content with being a crude martial artist?\*

One thought after another flooded his mind, extolling the virtues of Buddhism, and the worst part was that Xu Qi'an found them convincing.

People's thoughts can change, though it usually takes a long time. But in this moment, Xu Qi'an's very core beliefs were altered in an instant. He began to long for Buddhism, to yearn for the Dharma.

Even the allure of the Oirans from the Jiaofangsi lost its appeal.

In full view of the crowd, Xu Qi'an slowly stood up. He unsheathed his black-gold long saber and reached with his other hand to touch the sable hat atop his head...

\*Fuck! I can't take this off! I can't!\*

A deep sense of humiliation helped him regain a sliver of "self."

Unsheathing the blade, reaching for the hat—this was him preparing to ordain himself as a monk. But he had no hair to shave. If he took off the sable hat, his bare scalp would be exposed to the thousands in the crowd.

...

"This trip to the Great Feng was truly the best decision this poor monk has ever made," said Arhat Du'e, his voice filled with satisfaction. "In a single moment, not only have I gained insight into Mahayana Buddhism, but I have also acquired a naturally gifted disciple with immense Buddha-nature. Amitabha, truly, Heaven blesses Buddhism."

The crowd seethed with anger.

Yet instead of curses, they all focused intently on Xu Qi'an, holding their breath. Everyone could see that Xu Qi'an was struggling, fighting against the effects of the Asura's Heart.

"Hold on, hold on..." Lin'an whispered to herself, her small hands tightly twisting her dress.

Huaiqing's pupils slightly dilated. She had a single, clear thought. The thought took shape in two words: \*Do not.\*

Xu Pingzhi stood up, fists clenched as if he were lending his strength to his nephew.

"You don't seem too concerned about him becoming a monk," said the plain-looking woman, noticing that whilst everyone else was either angry or anxious, this cousin kept staring intently at Arhat Du'e instead of Xu Qi'an.

"I am concerned," Xu Xinnian said.

"Then why are you staring at Arhat Du'e?"

"I'm thinking about which angle would be best to stab him from," Xu Xinnian replied.

At the top of the Stargazing Tower, Emperor Yuanjing suddenly turned and pointed toward Xu Qi'an in the mysterious secret realm, his voice urgent. "Jianzheng, We will not allow Xu Qi'an to enter the monastic order and become a Buddhist disciple. No matter what, you must stop this."

Jianzheng smiled. "Your Majesty, you are the sovereign of the land. Why worry about a mere Silver Gong?"

"No!" Emperor Yuanjing snapped, anger seething. "It has taken so long for the Great Feng to produce a prodigy of his calibre. How could we allow the Buddhists to take him away? Do whatever it takes to stop this, even if it means forfeiting the Disc of Heaven's Secrets."

Jianzheng nodded. "Be calm, Your Majesty."

He grasped his wine cup, and the wine inside remained still, reflecting the mountains, rivers, and the lives of all common people.

Jianzheng's elderly hand clenched the cup tightly, veins bulging as if he were gathering power.

The Diamond Sutra was in his hands; his goal was already achieved. As for the "Asura's Heart" test, only an external force could stop it. Xu Qi'an alone would never be able to resist the flood of Buddhist power overwhelming him.

But just as Jianzheng was about to act, he paused and glanced toward the distant Cloud Deer Academy...

...

"Aha! Running dog resisted it!" Lin'an squealed with excitement.

Inside the temple, Xu Qi'an let go of the sable hat. It remained on his head.

He had regained control of his will, resisting the urge to join Buddhism and rejecting the thoughts that had been forcibly planted in his mind.

\*Phew...\* This exhale came from countless people outside the temple.

Arhat Du'e furrowed his brow, shaking his head. "Only by entering Buddhism can one transcend suffering and achieve immortality. Only through immortality can one enlighten others. You possess immense Buddha-nature, so why are you so stubborn?"

Xu Qi'an's resistance seemed to have angered the Buddha statue. The mist around the Buddha Mountain trembled violently as an enormous Dharma aspect, towering above the heavens, materialized.

It seemed to encompass all things, making everything else appear insignificant. Clouds swirled around its form, and its face was hidden from view, too high to see with the naked eye.

The temple beneath it was no larger than the palm of its hand.

The towering Dharma aspect slowly lowered its head, gazing down at the temple, and then, it gently extended a massive hand toward it.

With a slow press!

Inside the temple, Xu Qi'an's shoulders suddenly sank, as if a mountain had been placed on top of him.

The overwhelming pressure threatened to force him to his knees.

\*Don't kneel, don't kneel...\* Xu Qi'an's instincts flared. He knew with certainty that if he knelt, there would be no turning back.

He would become a different person—one who revered the Buddha and practiced Buddhism.

Outside the temple, the Buddha's towering hand pressed down once more.

\_Crack, crack, crack...\_ Xu Qi'an's bones began to pop like firecrackers, especially his spine, which seemed on the verge of breaking through his skin.

His head hung lower and lower, unable to lift.

But despite everything, his knees remained unbent.

\*I won't kneel, I won't kneel! If I am to believe in Buddhism, it will be by my own choice! No one can suppress me.\*

His head lowered, Xu Qi'an's face flushed red, and sweat rolled down drop by drop. His eyes were bloodshot, his face twisted with exertion as he struggled against the immense pressure descending from above.

He opened his mouth and stubbornly spat out, "I... will... not... kneel..."

...

Cloud Deer Academy.

In the Hall of the Lesser Sage, a dense wave of clear qi shot skyward, and the entire hall trembled once more.

Inside the academy, the scholars and professors either lifted their heads or stepped out of their rooms, looking toward the direction of the Lesser Sage Hall.

Inside the hall, flashes of light flickered repeatedly, and the Headmaster, Zhao Shou, along with three Grand Scholars, suddenly appeared.

"What's happening? Why is the senior moving again?" Zhang Shen asked in bewilderment.

The redwood box suspended above the head of the Lesser Sage statue was violently shaking. This time, the vibrations were extremely intense, as if something inside the box was urgently trying to break free.

"Is someone calling upon the power of the masses again?" Li Mubai's eyes widened in disbelief.

Headmaster Zhao Shou frowned deeply and bowed, saying, "Senior, please be at peace."

But the redwood box vibrated even more intensely.

Seeing this, the three Grand Scholars immediately mustered their boundless righteous energy and, together with Headmaster Zhao Shou, attempted to suppress the box. They cupped their hands and said, "Senior, please be at peace."

The box quieted down once more, but in the next moment...

"Boom!"

The redwood box exploded, sending a wave of clear energy throughout the hall. Zhao Shou and the three Grand Scholars were struck in their chests, vomiting blood, and sent flying through the air.

A streak of clear light broke free from the box, pierced through the ceiling of the hall, and shot into the sky.

Headmaster Zhao Shou rushed out of the Hall of the Lesser Sage, his gaze following the streak of light as it swept across the mountains and disappeared into the horizon.

It was heading toward the capital...

...

"Amitabha. I did not expect Benefactor Xu's determination to be so deep. I am sure that after joining the Buddhist order, his heart will become even purer," Arhat Du'e said, clasping his hands together.

Biaobiao glared fiercely at Arhat Du'e, then suddenly stepped out of the pavilion and shouted, "Don't kneel to that bald donkey, you running dog, stand up!"

Inside the Buddha Realm, Xu Qi'an's shoulders were bloodied, and his neck bent at an unnatural angle. His agony was painfully clear to everyone watching from outside.

What kind of conviction could allow someone to endure such overwhelming pressure and still keep their knees straight?

Was this the same Xu Qi'an?

Was this the same flirtatious and lecherous Xu Qi'an everyone knew?

Those familiar with him felt a shock deep within their hearts.

Suddenly, an elderly man in plain clothes stood up from the pavilion. His eyes were red, and with a trembling voice, he shouted:

"\*A young man's valour, brings heroes from five capitals old! With loyal heart, with just hand. With words of iron, life or death, A promise is worth a thousand tons of gold!...\* A man who could write such verses will not kneel!"

It was Governor Zhang.

Xu Pingzhi shouted, "Ning Yan, stand up straight, don't kneel!"

Xu Lingyin suddenly let out a wail, "Big brother..."

Wei Yuan gently patted her head and finished her sentence, "Won't kneel."

Wang Shoufu stood up, his voice loud and clear, "A warrior of the Great Feng does not kneel."

Among the crowd, someone suddenly raised a fist and roared, "Do not kneel!"

This ignited a fuse, and the gathered citizens erupted.

"Do not kneel!"

"Do not kneel!"

"Do not kneel!"

One by one, two by two... More and more people began shouting, "Do not kneel." A father lifted his son onto his shoulders, and the child's crisp voice rang out, "Don't kneel!"

A husband grasped his wife's hand, and together they shouted, "The people of the Great Feng do not kneel!"

From the pavilion to the open grounds, from nobles to commoners, in that moment, all of the citizens of Great Feng shouted in unison:

"DO NOT KNEEL!"

...

\*I can feel the power of the masses again...\* In his hazy consciousness, a pure thought surged into Xu Qi'an's mind, vast and chaotic.

It conveyed a single message: Do not kneel!

In an instant, Xu Qi'an's eyes erupted with unprecedented brilliance, like a pilgrim lost in the darkness who had finally seen the dawn.

He still couldn't straighten his spine, but as if moved by some unseen force, he raised his arm, as though to grasp something.

Something was coming.

At the same time, Xu Qi'an shouted out with the voice of the tens of thousands in the capital:

"I, Xu Qi'an, WILL. NOT. KNEEL!"

At that very moment, a streak of clear light shot through the sky, rumbling as it broke through the air, carrying an unmatched force as it crashed into the Buddha Realm.

Sensing this, the towering Buddha statue withdrew its palm and brought it down to strike the incoming light.

At the moment of impact, both the clear light and the golden light dimmed for a brief second. Then, an explosion of radiant blue and gold burst forth.

Only after that came the "boom" of the explosion, shaking the citizens of the capital, who covered their heads and fled in panic.

Outside the arena, fierce winds howled.

The towering Buddha statue shattered into pure golden light, dispersing back into the Buddha Realm. The clear light, having fulfilled its purpose, entered the temple and landed in Xu Qi'an's hand.

It was a simple, black carving knife.

Slowly, Xu Qi'an stood up, gripping the knife tightly.

"All beings can become Buddhas, so why should I kneel to you?"

With that, he calmly thrust the knife forward.

Crack... A crack appeared on the Buddha statue's forehead. The fissure spread instantly across its entire body before it shattered into pieces.

Boom!

As the statue collapsed, the Buddha Realm shook violently, mountains crumbling and the earth quaking.

Crack!

Arhat Du'e looked down in shock to see cracks spreading across his golden alms bowl before it shattered into dust.

The Buddha Realm dissolved into nothingness.

Two figures fell out—an unconscious Jing Si, and Xu Qi'an, standing tall, knife in hand.

Xu Qi'an glanced slowly around the arena, then his eyes rolled back, and he fainted.

But before he lost consciousness, he pressed his hand to his sable hat.

It was a matter of pride.

The entire field fell silent.

Chapter 297X. Luo Yuheng's Surprise

At the top of Stargazing Tower, the Jianzheng had unknowingly left the Bagua Platform and was now sharply watching the carving knife in Xu Qi'an's hand.

"Have you chosen him too?" At that moment, the man who had presided over the capital for five hundred years, a figure regarded as a "god" by the people of the Great Feng, murmured to himself.

"Hahaha..."

Emperor Yuanjing laughed heartily, hands clasped behind his back as he stood on the Great Feng's tallest tower, listening to the joyous cheers of the people. This was the Great Feng's victory, and his victory as well.

The Buddhist Sect, this time, was beneath his feet.

"What a fine 'I will not kneel,'" Emperor Yuanjing remarked. "How many years has it been since such an outstanding young hero has emerged in the capital?"

"Ahhhhh..."

Biaobiao let out an ear-piercing scream, stomping her feet in excitement. "He won, Huaiqing! Running Dog won! He's my servant, he's my servant!"

Princess Huaiqing gazed at the unconscious Xu Qi'an, her eyes filled with a trace of infatuation.

She was a woman of extraordinary beauty and pride. Even a zhuangyuan was merely acceptable in her eyes. Among the countless talented individuals in the capital, the only one who had ever truly earned her admiration was Wei Yuan.

Dean Zhao Shou was a respectable junior but did not inspire her reverence.

At this moment, Huaiqing recalled the many accomplishments of Xu Qi'an—how he had emerged during the tax silver case, secretly scheming to trap the Ministry of Revenue's vice minister's son Zhou Li, completely eradicating any hidden consequences.

Then he had joined the Nightwatchers, cutting down a Silver Gong, being imprisoned, and rising to the challenge to investigate the Sangpo case... He almost single-handedly completed the investigation in Yunzhou, then returned to the capital, where he was tasked with the Consort Fu case.

Throughout this time, he had produced one literary masterpiece after another, greatly inspiring the scholars of the Great Feng.

And now, acting on behalf of the Sitianjian in a contest against the Buddhist Sect, he had twice drawn his blade, restoring the capital's people's confidence with his courage.

In a debate, he had freed an old monk from his obsessions under the Bodhi Tree, causing an esteemed Second-Rank Arhat to achieve enlightenment and comprehend Mahayana Buddhism.

Then, a streak of clear light had descended from the heavens, and with one strike, he had shattered the Buddha manifestation and destroyed the Arhat's precious artefact.

Princess Huaiqing had never seen such an extraordinary man before, never.

The women cheered, the civil and military officials laughed... and amidst the thunderous celebrations, Xu Pingzhi collapsed into a chair as if all the strength had been drained from him.

Just a little bit more, and the son he had raised might have been stolen by the Buddhists.

As the capital's citizens roared with excitement, amidst the fervent shouts of victory, Xu Qi'an, the hero of the hour, went unnoticed. Xu Erlang quietly walked over and carried his older brother on his back.

\*In the end, I'm the one to bear it all...\* Xu Erlang thought.

Carrying Xu Qi'an, he walked toward the Nightwatchers, his eyes catching sight of the carving knife tightly held in Xu Qi'an's hand.

\*What is this? It seems to be a carving knife?\*



Judging by its appearance, it looked like an ancient scholar's "pen." Back then, when paper had not yet been invented, scholars carved their wisdom into bamboo slips with knives.

\*Where did this carving knife come from...? I'll just swipe it later when no one's paying attention!\*  
Xu Erlang's eyes gleamed; the temptation of such an ancient artefact was hard for a scholar to resist.

Arhat Du'e stood dazed, not grieving over the destruction of his golden alms bowl but deeply regretting that such a naturally gifted disciple of Buddhism had not found his way to the fold.

"Senior Uncle..."

Monk Jingchen gazed at Xu Erlang's retreating figure, at the unconscious Xu Qi'an on his back, and said solemnly, "Master Xu is a heavenly talent bestowed upon us by the heavens, the founder of Mahayana Buddhism. Senior Uncle, you must take him back to the Western Regions."

Arhat Du'e pondered for a long time before heaving a deep sigh. "It's alright. The time is not right."

Monk Jingchen, unwilling to accept this, and as if having a sudden sword, turned to glance at the Stargazing Tower but ultimately remained silent.

...

Though the contest between the Buddhist Sect and the Sitianjian had ended, the echoes of this magnificent event continued to reverberate.

In a certain tavern, a middle-aged man in a worn blue robe, carrying an empty wine jar, stepped over the threshold and entered the hall on the first floor, heading straight for the counter.

"Shopkeeper, I heard if you talk about the contest, you can get a free jar of wine?"

The goatee-wearing shopkeeper smiled and nodded. "You can even drink while you talk. Our small shop will also offer a plate of peanuts on the house."

The middle-aged man hesitated for a moment. He had planned to take the wine home, but the shopkeeper was offering so much, so he said, "Alright, I'll drink here. Quickly, bring the peanuts."

The shopkeeper beckoned to a waiter, who promptly brought the man a jar of wine and a plate of peanuts.

The middle-aged man took a sip of wine and popped a couple of peanuts into his mouth before slowly beginning his tale:

"When the Buddhist Arhat tossed the golden bowl to the ground, the wind and clouds shifted, lightning intertwined, and the sky transformed into a Buddhist domain. Within it were trials four: The first was the Eight Sufferings Array, a formidable challenge, said to be used by Buddhist monks to temper their hearts..."

"This second trial was called the Vajra Array. Shopkeeper, do you know who the Vajra is?"

The middle-aged man glanced haughtily at the shopkeeper.

"Wasn't it that young monk from the southern city?" the waiter scoffed.

"Yeah, just a small monk," a nearby patron chimed in.

"You all knew that...?" The middle-aged man was taken aback.

"Didn't Xu Silver Gong slice him apart with one stroke? What Vajra? Nothing but a paper tiger!" The patron's expression was filled with the pride of a capital resident.

Just a day earlier, at the mention of Monk Jingsi, they would have gnashed their teeth, furious that "the Great Feng, with its many powerful experts, couldn't even handle a young monk?"

Helpless rage.

But now, when the little Vajra body monk was mentioned, even the common folk puffed out their chests with pride, sneering, "Nothing special."

This was all thanks to Xu Qi'an, who had painstakingly regained the city's honour and rebuilt their confidence throughout the contest.

The middle-aged man in the blue robe looked at the shopkeeper in astonishment. "You knew about all this, so why set such rules?"

"Different people see things differently. It's about filling in the gaps," the shopkeeper replied with a sly smile. "Today, I stayed at the tavern and missed the battle. It's one of life's great regrets.

"I can only savour it afterward, with a little wine, and turn regret into pleasure."

The blue-robed man nodded and continued, "...After that, Sir Xu walked out, reciting poetry with every step..."

"Wait," the shopkeeper suddenly interrupted. "Was there really a line that went, 'Where the seas end the heavens make shore, I stand atop the warrior's peak'? Are you sure about that? Several others have recounted this part to me, but none mentioned this line."

The blue-robed man nodded firmly. "There is, there is indeed, I've got over a decade of study in me, how could I forget a few lines of poetry?"

"Hmm... that's strange," the shopkeeper frowned.

At that moment, a Jianghu man sitting nearby coughed and said in a low voice, "Shopkeeper, the ones who told you that were all Jianghu heroes, right?"

"Is that a problem?" the shopkeeper asked.

"Hey!" The martial artist waved his hand, "It doesn't matter to ordinary folks like you, but for those of us who practice martial arts, who would dare to say such things in public? That's either asking for a fight or a beating."

The shopkeeper suddenly understood. Martial artists were known for being hot-headed and often reacted violently if someone speaks too arrogantly. Even in the highly regulated capital, such incidents happened frequently.

"I've just collected another fine poem—and one of Xu the Poet's works at that! Quick, prepare me some paper and a brush," the shopkeeper excitedly ordered the waiter.

...

The Hanlin Academy.

The Hanlin Academy belonged to the Inner Cabinet, responsible for compiling books, writing histories, drafting imperial edicts, tutoring members of the royal family, and serving as examiners for the imperial examinations.

It was one of the three most prestigious positions in the court, alongside the Censorate and the Six Ministries.

The court's three most important occupations were: a Censor from the Censorate, a Director from the Six Ministries, and a scholar of the Hanlin Academy.

In terms of status though, the Hanlin Academy ranked highest, as it also has another name: a nursery for Prime Ministers.

All of the Great Feng's prime ministers had come from Hanlin Academy. To put it another way, only those from the Academy could enter the Inner Cabinet and become an Academy Chancellor or even take an official role as the Prime Minister.

Only the nobility or the royal family could skip over Hanlin Academy and go immediately into the cabinet, wielding true political power. Regular civil officials however must go through the Hanlin Academy to advance.

At this moment, a palace eunuch from Emperor Yuanjing's palace was scolding the nobles gathered in the main hall of Hanlin Academy.

"This victory in the contest—was it not due to His Majesty's wisdom in choosing capable people? Was it not the court's merit in nurturing Sir Xu? Look at what you've written. You're all graduates of the first rank, yet you can't even write a decent historical record."

The eunuch tossed the books onto the ground. "Rewrite them."

The faces of the gathered nobles darkened. They had rushed back to the Hanlin Academy without even stopping to eat, driven by passion, to write down their accounts of the day's events.

Today's contest would undoubtedly be recorded in the annals of history and passed down to future generations. But how it was written would be a matter of great importance.

For events that bring glory to the nation, the records would certainly be positive, symbolizing honour and prestige.

Those in power, namely Emperor Yuanjing, naturally wanted to share in that glory.

Of course, other emperors would make similar choices given such opportunities.

A young editor from the Hanlin Academy spoke in a serious tone, "It was the Jianzheng who chose the man, and it was Sir Xu who fought in the contest. What does any of this have to do with His Majesty? As members of the Hanlin Academy, we do not write only for the court but also for future generations."

The eunuch sneered. "It was His Majesty's favour that allowed you to enter the Hanlin Academy. In time, you'll enter the Inner Cabinet—your future is bright, like the sun and moon shining down on you.

"But upset His Majesty, and you'll be sent far away. Then, even starlight will be hard to come by.

“His Majesty's will is clear: keep the length unchanged, detail the contest and His Majesty's selection process, but as for praising Sir Xu, he is still young. There will be plenty of opportunities for that in the future.

"Do you understand, my lords?"

The young editor grabbed an inkstone and hurled it at the eunuch, hitting him in the chest. Ink spilled, staining the eunuch's robe.

"How dare you hit us?" the eunuch roared.

"Of course I bloody well dare!" the editor cursed, pointing at him. "When the Western Region's delegation arrived in the capital, first a Vajra monk set up a ring in the southern city, and then a Silacarya preached in the northern city. After that, the Dharma Aspect descended and questioned the Jianzheng.

"Then, the Sitianjian and the Buddhist sect engaged in a duel. Xu the Poet turned the tide and defeated the Buddhist attack. Without him, the court would have been utterly disgraced. So why shouldn't we praise him? Why reduce the space dedicated to him? He is a young hero. If he were a scholar, I would bow to him as my teacher.

"Now get out! The Hanlin Academy is not a place for a cock-less dog like you to throw your weight around."

"Get out!" The other young nobles grabbed whatever they could—ink, paper, books, inkstones—and hurled them at the eunuch, forcing him to flee the Hanlin Academy in panic.

...

Lingbao Temple.

A woman dressed in a luxurious palace gown, the hem of her dress trailing on the ground, and adorned with precious jewelry, entered the inner courtyard. Her posture was graceful, and her voice gentle as she instructed:

"You two may leave now. I have something to discuss with the National Teacher."

The two maids who accompanied her retreated from the courtyard.

As soon as they were gone, the woman became lively, lifting the hem of her skirt and running into the meditation room, shouting, "National Teacher, why didn't I see you at today's contest? Did you watch it?"

Inside the quiet room, sitting cross-legged on a cushion, was Luo Yuheng, wearing a black Taoist robe and a lotus crown, her hair neatly combed to reveal a smooth forehead and a face of stunning beauty. She looked at the woman who had burst in unceremoniously and said indifferently:

"Not interested."

"Then you missed a great show!"

The veiled woman sat down by the table and said, "Today's contest was absolutely thrilling, more exciting than any performance by an opera troupe. Let me tell you about it..."

She began to chatter away, vividly recounting the entire process of the contest to Luo Yuheng.

"You're saying he broke the Eight Suffering Formation with a single slash?" Luo Yuheng frowned.

"Yes, it was incredible! Why, is something wrong?" the veiled woman asked.

\_The Jianzheng helped him, he even helped him move the power of the masses...\_ Luo Yuheng pondered for a moment before saying, "Go on."

The veiled woman then told her about Xu Qi'an breaking the Vajra Formation with a single strike. Luo Yuheng didn't comment, but when she heard about the conversation with the old monk and how Xu Qi'an led the Du'e Arhat to enlightenment, the woman remarked:

"Although I still don't understand what's so impressive about Mahayana Buddhism, it sure sounds profound."

\_Mahayana Buddhism... Does he really have such comprehension?\_ A flicker of surprise passed through Luo Yuheng's beautiful eyes.

"None of that compares to the most exciting part—the fourth challenge... When the golden Dharma aspect appeared and forced that scoundrel to kneel, that's when the most interesting scene unfolded..."

The veiled woman's eyes sparkled as she poured herself a large cup of tea and downed it.

Luo Yuheng smiled and said, "Drink slowly. Nanzhi, have you noticed something?"

"What?"

"In the past, whenever you came to my temple, you always complained about being bored and wanting to go out and play. But now, you no longer mention being bored. Not only that, but in everything you talk to me about, you always seem to bring up Xu Qi'an."

The veiled woman was taken aback. She stared at Luo Yuheng for a moment, then collected herself, reverting to her usual reserved and dignified demeanor, with a hint of distance in her tone. "What are you implying?"

Luo Yuheng shook her head with a smile. "I'm just reminding you that you are married. Your husband is Prince Huai, a third-rank martial artist. He guards the borderlands, far from the capital.

"But he has many confidants and spies in the capital. You should avoid too much entanglement with Xu Qi'an, or you'll only bring harm to him."

The veiled woman snorted disdainfully, her tone proud. "How could I possibly have any entanglement with a scoundrel who frequents the Jiaofangsi? Are you insulting me?"

"That's fine," Luo Yuheng nodded. "Actually, you don't need to tell me the rest of the story. I already know what happened next—either the Dharma Body inexplicably shattered, or the Jianzheng intervened."

Just earlier, she had sensed a surge of the power of the masses, which then subsided into calm.

It was either the Jianzheng helping in secret or acting openly.

After all, in the capital, where Emperor Yuanjing's fortune was lacking, and his cultivation weak, only an Arcanist, a first-rank Arcanist—the Jianzheng—could command the power of the masses.

"It wasn't that."

The veiled woman shook her head, her tone growing colder.

\_This woman is so touchy...\_ Luo Yuheng chuckled, holding her teacup. "It wasn't?"

"A beam of clear light descended from the heavens and shattered both the Dharma Body and the Buddhist domain," the woman said quietly.

"I was nearby at the time and saw it clearly. It was... a carving knife."

\_A carving knife?!\_

It was as if thunder had exploded in her ears. Luo Yuheng's hand shook, and warm tea splashed from her cup. Her elegant face froze.

\_It wasn't the Jianzheng... The Jianzheng could never wield the Confucian carving knife...\_ Luo Yuheng's voice dropped as she asked, "A carving knife? Where is it now? What happened after that? Tell me everything in detail."

Her tone was filled with urgency and a hint of uncontrollable excitement. The veiled woman had never seen Luo Yuheng show such an intense emotional reaction before and asked curiously, "What's wrong with you?"

"Just tell me!" Luo Yuheng leaned forward, almost shouting.

"...The carving knife shattered the Dharma Body, that's all."

"Did the carving knife disappear after breaking the Dharma Body, or did it remain on the scene? Did... did Xu Qi'an touch the carving knife?" Luo Yuheng's eyes burned with intensity, as if this detail was crucial.

"Yeah, he stabbed the Dharma Body in the temple with it," the woman said, raising her right arm and making a stabbing motion.

Luo Yuheng froze, stunned.

Chapter 298. Two Conversations

"National Teacher, National Teacher?"

The veiled woman called out a few times, before noticing that Luo Yuheng's face was vacant and her gaze unfocused, like a jade statue — beautiful, but devoid of life.

She reached out to push her, but was blocked by a wall of qi.

.....

In the outer city, in a small courtyard.

A flash of light descended, invisible to ordinary people, landing in the courtyard and transforming into a stunning woman dressed in a black Daoist robe and wearing a lotus crown.

Her almond-shaped eyes and peach-like cheeks were exquisite, her features flawless. Her black, lustrous hair and the loose Daoist robe couldn't conceal her proud and shapely figure.

Luo Yuheng pushed open the door and saw an old Daoist with graying hair lying on the bed, his face peaceful.

She focused her mind and extended a pale hand from her loose robe, grasping abruptly.

Moments later, a faintly transparent figure returned from afar and was drawn into her palm. With a flick of her sleeve, she sent it back into the old Daoist's body.

Daoist Jinlian opened his eyes and sat up cross-legged, saying helplessly, "I was already on my way back."

As he spoke, Daoist Jinlian eyed Luo Yuheng's tall, curvaceous figure, and said, "Junior sister, your Yang Spirit has left your body, it must be urgent. What's the matter?"

Luo Yuheng didn't waste words and asked bluntly, "Did you watch the duel today?"

Daoist Jinlian nodded.

"The Confucian carving knife appeared."

...Daoist Jinlian hesitated slightly before nodding again.

"I want to know, who exactly is Xu Qi'an?" Luo Yuheng stepped forward, her beautiful eyes burning with intensity.

"A regular person," Daoist Jinlian's reply was unnaturally hesitant.

"A regular person who can wield the Confucian carving knife?" Luo Yuheng laughed coldly.

Daoist Jinlian frowned and remained silent.

After a long pause, he spoke slowly, "When I first met him, I saw that he was someone with great luck, so I gave him a fragment of the Earth Book to borrow back some of his luck and avoid Zilian's pursuit.

"Afterward, I investigated his background and found it a bit strange. Whether it was Li Miaozen, Chu Yuanzen, or others, I gave them fragments of the Earth Book when they were already rising in power.

"Only Xu Qi'an was still in the Refining Vitality stage, and his family background was utterly unremarkable. Where did his luck come from? Luck comes either from doing good deeds or from ancestral blessings. He had neither."

Luo Yuheng listened patiently, not interrupting.

"Then something happened that made me realise something was wrong with him... One day, this child casually mentioned in the Earth Book fragment that he kept finding silver daily and wanted to know why."

At this, Luo Yuheng couldn't help but interject, "That's not luck, is it?"

Daoist Jinlian looked deeply into her eyes, his gaze bright and penetrating. He spoke each word clearly, "It's Fortune. Overwhelming Fortune."

Though she had her suspicions, hearing Daoist Jinlian's confirmation caused Luo Yuheng's pupils to contract sharply.

.....

Xu Qi'an slowly regained consciousness, feeling pain all over his body, especially a burning sensation around his neck.

He rolled his eyes and scanned his surroundings—white bed curtains, a brocade quilt embroidered with lotus leaves, and simple but elegant furnishings... Sitting at the round table in the outer hall was an old man in a Confucian robe.

The old man's disheveled white hair hung loosely, his Confucian robe was slack, and his white beard hadn't been trimmed for a long time. The entire man exuded a sense of despondency.

\*Who is this Cynic?\* Xu Qi'an wondered.

"You're awake," the Cynic old man stood up with a smile and said, "I'm Zhao Shou, the Dean of Cloud Deer Academy."

\*The Dean of Cloud Deer Academy... Cijiu once said that the dean of the Academy is a third-rank Confucian in the Mandate Seeker stage!\* Xu Qi'an immediately sat up straight, cupping his hands respectfully:

"Ah, Dean Zhao. The Dean's aura is extraordinary, cultured yet restrained. Truly a respected elder."

After a pause, he added, "Why is the Dean in my room?"

Zhao Shou didn't answer. His gaze landed on Xu Qi'an's right hand, where Xu realised he was still holding the carving knife.

He was momentarily stunned, then quickly guessed: \*This knife belongs to Cloud Deer Academy? Of course, what other system could carry such righteous qi?\*

"This carving knife is the Academy's great treasure. You've been holding it in your hand the whole time, and no one could take it from you. So I had no choice but to wait here for you to wake up, and ask you some questions."

After speaking, Zhao Shou glanced at the ancient carving knife again, his expression almost saying: \*Still holding it? Young man, you have no manners.\*

Xu Qi'an obediently offered the knife with both hands.

Zhao Shou didn't take it but looked at the table instead.

Xu Qi'an understood and threw the knife onto the table with a clang.

Zhao Shou's brow twitched. He hurriedly bowed three times to the carving knife before taking a wooden box from his sleeve and carefully placing the knife inside.

"Does Sir Xu know the origin of this knife?" Zhao Shou asked with a smile.

Xu Qi'an's heart skipped a beat, and he boldly guessed, "The carving knife of the Lesser Sage?"

Zhao Shou shook his head. "This is the carving knife of the Sage."

\*The Sage's carving knife... Could it be that Sage? The beyond-rank Sage... uh, can I hold the knife a little longer? I haven't even taken a picture for my social media...\* Xu Qi'an's mouth hung open, his throat suddenly dry, unable to speak.



"Since the Lesser Sage's passing, this carving knife has been dormant for over a thousand years. Although successors could use it, they couldn't awaken it. I didn't expect it to break out of its box today to aid Sir Xu."

Zhao Shou gazed intently at Xu Qi'an and said solemnly, "There are some things I must mention to you in person."

Xu Qi'an's heart sank, sensing the seriousness, and he got out of bed, bowing deeply. "Please enlighten me, Dean."

.....

"Impossible, impossible..."

Luo Yuheng kept shaking her head, her delicate, long brows tightly knit. She argued:

"I've been in contact with him many times. If he had fate on him, I would've sensed it. How could my sect not have noticed?"

Daoist Jinlian asked, "What if heaven's secrets are being blocked? Even now, if you look at Xu Qi'an again, you won't sense anything unusual."

"Are you suggesting the Jianzheng?" Luo Yuheng took a deep breath, her frown still strikingly beautiful, her eyes sharp as knives as she spoke:

"You've investigated Xu Qi'an, haven't you? He's just a lowly Silver Gong. His ancestors were no extraordinary figures. How could he bear such fate?"

"I'm sorry, I haven't figured that out either," Daoist Jinlian replied, rising from the bed. He walked to the table, poured two cups of water, and gestured for Luo Yuheng to sit.

The female National Teacher ignored him.

She had no mind for tea at the moment.

Luo Yuheng thought for a long time before suddenly speaking, "If an arcanist has shielded away heavenly secrets, then logically speaking, you shouldn't be able to see his fortune at all. The Jianzheng's schemes are as subtle as a snake hidden in the grass—if he doesn't want others to know, then no one will ever know. That's the power of a first-rank arcanist."

Daoist Jinlian, sipping his tea calmly, replied, "Naturally, I had thought of that. Not long ago, I noticed his fortune had disappeared and went to check on him. I discovered that the Jianzheng had indeed concealed heavenly secrets, masking his uniqueness. That was when I knew something was off—there's a great mystery hidden behind Xu Qi'an."

"When I left the Xu residence that day, I somehow found myself walking to the Bagua Platform of the Star Observation Tower, where I met the Jianzheng."

Luo Yuheng narrowed her eyes, "What did he say?"

"Well water does not intrude on river water."[^1] Daoist Jinlian said solemnly.

The alluring beauty, with her voluptuous figure, fell into silence for a while before gritting her teeth and venting, "The fall in the dynasty's fortune must be linked to the Sitianjian."

Daoist Jinlian frowned. "What do you mean?"

Luo Yuheng finally sat down at the table, raising a cup of tea to her red lips and taking a sip. "Some years ago, Wei Yuan visited Lingbao Temple and angrily called me a *\*femme fatale\** to my face.

"He said that ever since the Emperor started cultivating the Dao under my influence, the Great Feng's national strength had been declining, taxes and grain from the provinces were frequently not collected, and the people were suffering while corrupt officials ran rampant.

"All this was because I had bewitched the Emperor into pursuing Daoist cultivation, causing him to neglect state affairs."

*\*Isn't that true though?\** Daoist Jinlian thought, though he kept his thoughts to himself.

"That was when I realised the dynasty's fortune was slowly leaking away, like a dull knife cutting through flesh, imperceptible at first. If it hadn't been for Wei Yuan, with his talent for governance and keen understanding of civil matters, I might not have noticed until it was too late."

Daoist Jinlian nodded but reminded her, "Let's not talk too much here. This is the Jianzheng's territory—he could be listening to everything we're saying."

"No need to worry," Luo Yuheng said with confidence, "He can't hear us."

*\*It's not about whether he can hear—it's about whether I want to be involved in this mess at all...\** Daoist Jinlian wisely changed the topic.

"If, and this is just a hypothesis, Xu Qi'an indeed carries immense fortune, would you consider dual cultivation with him?"

Luo Yuheng froze, her expression stiffening again.

.....

"Do you know why the Sage's carving knife emerged from its box? Why, aside from the Lesser Sage, no one in later generations has been able to awaken it, only use it?" Zhao Shou asked two consecutive questions.

*\*I'm just a crude martial artist, Dean...\** Xu Qi'an shook his head, indicating he had no idea.

The Dean didn't keep him in suspense, speaking in a low tone, "It's due to a lack of fortune. This carving knife was wielded by a Sage. With it, he carved the *\*Spring and Autumn Annals\**, the *\*Book of Rites\**, the *\*Book of Music\**, the *\*Book of Changes\**, and more.

"Those without a vast fortune gathered from the world, cannot use it."

The Dean's explanation finally unravelled the mystery that had puzzled Xu Qi'an for so long—his strange luck was, in fact, due to fortune.

*\*Finding silver every day—what else could that be if not the fortune of the heavens? Starting with one coin a day, then three, then five... it grows every day.\**

*\*No, rather growing, it's more like it's slowly awakening inside me...\** Xu Qi'an mused, feeling the weight of the realisation.

There was a reason for his thoughts. As his cultivation advanced, his luck had gotten better and better. At first glance, it seemed like his luck was improving, but how could luck actually "level up"?

The only explanation was that the fortune inside him was gradually reawakening.

\*But I'm just a child from an ordinary family in the capital. The Xu family is nothing special. My second uncle and biological father were both low-ranking military men—hardly anything remarkable.\*

\*Unless... I'm not really a child of the Xu family.\*

He had entertained this suspicion before, especially after that encounter in the palace with the simp dragon... (struck out) A spirit dragon that seemed overly fond of him. Daoist Jinlian had once mentioned that spirit dragons were drawn to those blessed with purple qi.

At the time, Xu Qi'an had thought, \*Oh no, what if I'm some long-lost illegitimate child of the royal family? I've had my eyes on Huaqing's beauty all this time...\*

But his pre-transformation face bore a striking resemblance to his second uncle's, and from a genetic standpoint, they were clearly related by blood.

Xu Qi'an was, without a doubt, the son of the Xu family, the offspring of Xu Pingzhi's brother. Even if he were an illegitimate child, he would still be surnamed Xu.

There was no fundamental change.

So where did this fortune come from?

Dean Zhao Shou, his tone gentle, continued, "This fortune is mysterious yet undeniably real. In Jiuzhou, there are three entities associated with fortune: first, the Confucians; second, the Arcanists; and third, the rulers of men.

"The third group isn't limited to the Great Feng. The Church of the Warlock God and the Buddhist sect of the Western Regions are included as well. As for the barbarian tribes of the north and south, the former are too scattered, and the latter too few in number to gather such fortune."

\*The Confucians have nothing to do with me, otherwise the Dean wouldn't be explaining all this to me... So my fortune must come from one of two sources: the royal family or the Sitianjian.\*

\*If I'm a royal descendant, I'm in trouble. Lin'an and Huaqing would be my sisters, or maybe cousins. But based on the spirit dragon's reaction, I'm unlikely to be of royal blood. If I were, wouldn't it favour the legitimate princes and princesses more?\*

\*Besides, I've never seen Lin'an or Huaqing finding silver every day.\*

\*Right now, I've got a steady relationship with Lin'an, and things are progressing well with Huaqing too. I'm also a viscount, and if I can raise my rank to earl in the future, I might even have a shot at marrying a princess.\*

\*I absolutely cannot be related to the royal family by blood!\*

Considering the Jianzheng's previous behavior and attitude, Xu Qi'an suspected that this had something to do with the Sitianjian. No, it had something to do with the Jianzheng himself.

Seeing that Xu Qi'an seemed to have come to some realisation, Zhao Shou chuckled and asked, "Anything else you'd like to know?"

\*Is there anything else... Hmm, Dean, how about this: Xu Qi'an's staff will never fall—what do you think of that? Would you say that to me?\* Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

Outwardly, he shook his head. "No, thank you, Dean, for clearing up my confusion."

Zhao Shou nodded. "There's an eunuch from the palace waiting outside. Let him in. His Majesty has some questions for you."

An eunuch from the palace?

After a moment of thought, Xu Qi'an understood the eunuch's purpose.

During the duel, he had twice displayed extraordinary power, breaking both the Eight Sufferings Formation and the Vajra Formation—feats far beyond his own abilities.

Although some clever people might suspect the Jianzheng's secret intervention, routine questioning was inevitable.

Moreover... Xu Qi'an glanced at Zhao Shou. The first two miraculous feats could be attributed to the Jianzheng, but the appearance of the carving knife from the academy was beyond the Jianzheng's control.

\*Emperor Yuanjing is a ruler with a strong desire for control. He wouldn't overlook these details. If handled poorly, I could end up in trouble, revealing things I shouldn't—like the fact that the knife responded to my summons.\*

Xu Qi'an dressed, donned his sable fur cap, and accompanied Dean Zhao Shou to the hall.

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## Chapter 299. Crimson Lettered Iron Deed

"What? Junior Sister, if you do it, then you'll be able to extinguish your karmaic fire and step into the first rank very soon."

Daoist Jinlian smiled warmly, "Wouldn't that be an immense blessing?"

\*In that case, my goal of slaying demons is also within reach...\* Daoist Jinlian added to himself.

Luo Yuheng calmly said, "Even if Xu Qi'an is blessed with fortune, is he better than Emperor Yuanjing? Better than the future Crown Prince? Will the Jianzheng agree to me engaging in dual cultivation with him?"

Her question struck at the heart of the matter, leaving Daoist Jinlian without a rebuttal.

Daoist Jinlian nodded, "Junior Sister, your Dao heart is pure, indeed more suited than your father to become a First Rank Earthly Immortal."

Luo Yuheng gave no response.

After a moment of thought, Daoist Jinlian continued, "Junior Sister, would you mind having a Daoist companion?"

Seeing the female National Teacher glaring at him, he chuckled, “With fortune on his side and cultivating martial arts, Xu Qi’an’s future achievements will be immense. If you plan to dual cultivate with him, it won’t be a short-term affair. You can start the dual cultivation and then nurture feelings over time.

“Your branch of the Human Sect will eventually require you to bear descendants. Given your personality, would you seek another Daoist companion after dual cultivating with someone?”

Luo Yuheng snorted coldly, “An Earthly Immortal has an infinite lifespan. What need is there for descendants?”

Daoist Jinlian smiled silently.

Although Earthly Immortals were able to roam the sky and earth carefree, their longevity as long as the heavens above, unexpected accidents could still happen, necessitating heirs to carry on their legacy.

Besides, although the Junior Sister from the Human Sect was the leader of a Daoist Sect, she was still in the end a mortal woman. She hadn’t cultivated the emotionless path of the Heaven Sect, and so showing some temper was natural.

“If you step down earlier, the history books might write more favourably about you,” Daoist Jinlian said with a mischievous smile.

Luo Yuheng sneered, “Since ancient times, the history books always portray women as the root of disasters, as ruiners of nations, while the real problem lies with men. Those spineless scholars dare not anger the emperor, so they lay all the blame on women. It’s truly laughable.

“Emperor Yuanjing cultivates for the sake of immortality. He wishes to be a long-living emperor. Even without the Human Sect, he would still cultivate. What does that have to do with me?

“That dog Wei Yuan accused me of deceiving the emperor. All these years, I’ve constantly told Emperor Yuanjing that the pills are no longer effective, but he continues to take a large pill every season and a small one every ten days, ignoring my advice. Deceiving the emperor? Where does that even come from?”

“Junior Sister speaks the truth,” Daoist Jinlian agreed, then added a balanced assessment:

“Your Human Sect seeks to borrow imperial fortune to cultivate and suppress karmic fire. It’s a necessary evil, but it has indeed aided Emperor Yuanjing’s cultivation. It’s only natural for blame to fall on you.”

\*You’re trying to sit on the fence?\* Luo Yuheng stared at him for a few seconds, then stood up to leave. When she reached the threshold, she looked back and said:

“The end of Yuanjing 36, the remnant soul of the Earth Sect Leader drifted into the capital. Instead of cultivation, it spent its days possessing cats and mingling amongst them, content with its life... I’ll be sure to add this to the Human Sect’s chronicles.”

With that, she turned into a faint light and disappeared.

\*Junior Sister, we can talk this through!!\* Daoist Jinlian dashed out of the room and reached toward the sky, making a gesture as if to call her back...

“What a petty and vindictive woman,” Daoist Jinlian muttered.

...

Xu Manor.

Xu Qi’an left his room and, passing through the inner hall, saw Xu Lingyin happily running around, with Chu Caiwei chasing her.

As she ran, Xu Lingyin made a sound like a little tractor.

Auntie was tending to her potted plants on the side, while Xu Lingyue quietly sat on a chair, sipping tea and watching her younger sister play with the girl in the yellow dress.

\*This woman’s back at my house again. Clearly, she’s still thinking about my big brother...\* Xu Lingyue silently profiled Chu Caiwei but didn’t show it. When Chu Caiwei occasionally looked her way, Xu Lingyue responded with a gentle smile.

Xu Qi’an bowed towards Dean Zhao Shou before stepping into the hall and asking, “Miss Caiwei, what brings you here? Were you drawn in by my dashing looks?”

“Big brother, you’re awake?” Xu Lingyue asked excitedly.

Auntie also lifted her head from her beloved plants, observing her unlucky nephew.

Xu Qi’an had been unconscious for most of the day. By now, their initial excitement and relief had settled, and they no longer felt as anxious as before.

“Oh, I’m just here to deliver a message from teacher.” Chu Caiwei stopped chasing Xu Lingyin, glanced around, and beckoned Xu Qi’an over, “Come here.”

Xu Qi’an obediently went over, and the girl in the yellow dress leaned close and whispered in his ear, “My teacher said you can ask His Majesty for an iron deed.”

\*Iron deed?\* It took him a few seconds to realize what she was talking about.

Its formal name was a “Crimson lettered iron deed,” commonly known as a golden pardon.

\*What would I need that for? I’d rather trade it for a few thousand taels of gold and a promotion instead...\* Xu Qi’an thought.

“I understand,” he nodded.

Seeing the two of them whispering closely, Xu Lingyue puffed out her cheeks and called Xu Lingyin over, “Lingyin, go play with Sister Caiwei.”

Little Guard Dog Xu Lingyin waddled over on her short legs and headbutted Chu Caiwei's plump bottom, "Sister Caiwei, let's keep playing..."

Seeing this, Xu Qi'an had no choice but to leave, heading to the front hall with Zhao Shou.

"Dean, the Jianzheng instructed me to request an iron deed from His Majesty." Xu Qi'an shared this with Zhao Shou, then observed his reaction.

Only the wise could handle the wise.

Zhao Shou nodded slowly, "Indeed, a crimson lettered iron deed. It exempts one from all death sentences except for treason. However, after its use, one's titles and salary are stripped, and one is not permitted to retain their original holdings. But at least, it spares one's life."

\*Not permitted to retain their original holdings but spares one's life... What does that even mean?\*  
Xu Qi'an's face froze for a moment before returning to normal. He nodded and said:

"So that's what an crimson lettered iron deed means."

\*I guess a golden pardon is fine too... The Jianzheng specifically had Chu Caiwei deliver this message to me; there must be a reason... Hmm, I am a second-generation eunuch with many political enemies. It's a good safeguard.\*

Xu Qi'an wasn't really afraid of Emperor Yuanjing anymore. With his cultivation steadily rising, his confidence had grown. If he encountered a situation like the Silver Gong conflict again, at worst, he could simply leave and wander the Jianghu.

The only thing he couldn't bear to part with was his family.

As they conversed, the two of them arrived at the outer hall. Seated in the main position was a eunuch in a python robe, a middle-aged man with a pale face and no beard.

Xu Erlang and Uncle Xu were seated below them, making casual conversation with the eunuch.

"Is Ningyan awake?" Uncle Xu's ears twitched as he glanced toward the screen wall.

Xu Qi'an and Zhao Shou stepped out side by side.

"Dean!" Xu Erlang quickly rose and bowed.

The eunuch, who had been rather haughty while speaking to Xu Erlang and Uncle Xu, immediately plastered a smile on his face upon seeing Xu Qi'an emerge.

"Sir Viscount is awake! How is your health? If you need any recuperation, just let us know, and we'll bring something from the palace for you," the eunuch said with great enthusiasm.

"Ningyan, this is Lord Chen from the Directorate of Entourage Attendance," Uncle Xu said, straightening his back unconsciously and speaking with more confidence.

"Thank you for your concern, milord. We are fine," Xu Qi'an nodded.

"That's good, that's good," Eunuch Chen beamed, eagerly giving up the main seat to Xu Qi'an and Zhao Shou.

"We are here on behalf of His Majesty to visit you, Viscount. For your meritorious service to the court, His Majesty will certainly reward you handsomely."

"It is all thanks to His Majesty's recognition for giving this servant this opportunity. As they say, soldiers are trained for a thousand days, but are used in a single moment. It is due to the court's nurturing that I was able to achieve merit today," Xu Qi'an said humbly.

"Therefore, please inform His Majesty that I do not wish to claim any undue credit and instead request the bestowal of a Crimson-Lettered Iron Deed."

Hearing this, Xu Erlang and Uncle Xu had very different thoughts. Xu Erlang felt his elder brother was rather self-aware; the iron deed's value far exceeded gold or silk. Gold would only make his brother more extravagant in the Jiaofangsi, and silk would just increase the number of fine garments worn by their mother and sisters.

All were trivial in comparison.

Uncle Xu, on the other hand, could only think of the word "honour." Since ancient times, only meritorious officials were granted such an iron deed.

Eunuch Chen was momentarily stunned before replying, "We will certainly relay your message to His Majesty. His Majesty is also curious about a few things and has sent me to inquire."

\*Here it comes...\* Xu Qi'an remained calm and smiled, "Please, milord, ask away."

"During the duel, Viscount Xu drew his sabre twice, both times shocking the capital. However, those two strikes far exceeded your usual limits. His Majesty is curious as to how you managed that."

Though Eunuch Chen's face was still adorned with a smile, his eyes never wavered from Xu Qi'an.

"To be honest, I was gifted power by the Jianzheng," Xu Qi'an explained succinctly.

He didn't elaborate because such brevity aligned better with the Jianzheng's mysterious persona. Over-explaining would have seemed out of character. Besides, he had no fear of Emperor Yuanjing seeking confirmation from the Jianzheng.

This amount of tact, that LYB Jianzheng surely had.

Eunuch Chen nodded slowly, seemingly unsurprised. He then asked, "And what of the Confucian carving knife?"

Just as Xu Qi'an was about to respond, Zhao Shou interjected calmly, "Four hundred years ago, Cloud Deer Academy was able to destroy the Buddhists. It can do so again today."

Xu Qi'an immediately added, "I am grateful for the Dean's assistance."

Eunuch Chen glanced at Dean Zhao and chuckled, "So, it was the academy that lent a hand."

Though this technically counted as cheating in the duel, the Buddhist sect hadn't exactly played fair either. During the breaking of the Vajra Formation, Monk Jingchen had warned Monk Jingsi, and during the third round, Arhat Du'e had personally intervened in a debate on Buddhist teachings with Xu Qi'an.

Thus, the Buddhist sect had conceded graciously, without fixating on the carving knife issue.

"I see. Well, then, we shall not disturb Viscount Xu's rest any further," Eunuch Chen said, rising to leave.



...

The imperial palace.

Emperor Yuanjing, who had been meditating and consuming elixirs, heard faint footsteps. Without opening his eyes, he said calmly, "What is it?"

The old eunuch whispered, "The servant sent to the Hanlin Academy reports that the scholars refused to amend the text and even beat him up."

"Those mongrels!" Emperor Yuanjing opened his eyes, frowning.

When it came to power plays, the emperor was a master. But dealing with the unyielding Hanlin scholars, who refused to budge, the only recourse was brute force.

If you tried to engage them in a battle of wits and strategy, they would simply cover their ears and chant: "Not listening, not listening, the tortoise is preaching."

"Forget it, we'll take our time with them," Emperor Yuanjing sighed.

It was a minor issue, not worth causing a major uproar over, as it would damage his reputation too much.

He glanced at the still-present old eunuch and asked, "Is there something else?"

The eunuch nodded, "Silver Gong Xu has awoken. Eunuch Chen from the Department of Entourage Attendance brought back his response..."

The eunuch then relayed Xu Qi'an's request for an iron certificate.

"An iron deed?" Emperor Yuanjing's expression shifted with mild surprise before he let out a chuckle.

"Rather than seeking promotion or wealth, he asks for an iron deed?"

Though he made light of it, the emperor silently weighed the matter. He neither agreed nor refused.

The eunuch smiled softly and said, "It shows that Viscount Xu understands the situation well. He acknowledges Your Majesty's foresight and the court's training, and does not presume to ask for more. If he had requested a title promotion... that would have been troublesome."

\*This boy's wisdom surpasses that of the scholars at the Hanlin Academy...\* The emperor, now convinced, no longer hesitated and commanded, "Approved."

The eunuch had spoken truly. In peacetime, rapid ennoblement was rare; it only occurred frequently during times of war.

\*The appearance of the carving knife—due to Dean Zhao Shou's assistance?\* Emperor Yuanjing pondered this briefly, and driven by a sense of intuition, ended his meditation and ordered: "Prepare my carriage to Lingbao Temple."

...

Lingbao Temple.

“National Teacher, this victory in the duel has greatly elevated our Great Feng's prestige. Soon, the Southern and Northern savages, and even the Church of the Warlock God will hear of it.

"Having a Silver Gong participate in the duel will certainly sow doubt and fear among them, making them wary of our national strength. The impact is far greater than if Yang Qianhuan had stepped forward. National Teacher? National Teacher?"

Luo Yuheng snapped out of her daze, her beautiful eyes regaining focus as she frowned and asked, "What did Your Majesty say?"

Yuanjing Emperor stared at the bewitching and alluring National Teacher, suspicion clouding his gaze. "The National Teacher seems distracted. Is something troubling you? Speak freely, and We will resolve it for you."

As the head of the Human Sect and a second-rank Daoist, Yuanjing had rarely if even seen Luo Yuheng in such a preoccupied state. Never before had she appeared so burdened.

\*Could it be that the Conflict of Heaven and Man is weighing on her mind? This woman—why does she refuse to dual cultivate with Us? Our path to immortality is stuck precisely because of her...\*

His thoughts flickered as he noticed Luo Yuheng shaking her head. "Thank you for Your Majesty's concern, I'm alright."

The Emperor nodded and didn't press further. He proceeded to explain the true reason for his visit to Lingbao Temple. "Does the National Teacher know that during the duel, Cloud Deer Academy's carving knife appeared?"

"We know it to be a relic of the Sage, the Academy's most prized treasure. Given its reappearance, could there be more to the story?"

"Why does Your Majesty suspect this?" Luo Yuheng countered.

"The Sage's carving knife is no ordinary object, and Zhao Shou, being a third rank Mandate Seeker, may not even be able to wield it."

Yuanjing's insight was deep, especially given that Cloud Deer Academy once held sway over the court. The Imperial family had no shortage of information regarding the Academy and its mysteries.

Luo Yuheng pondered briefly before smiling indifferently. "Though Zhao Shou is third rank, the Academy still has three scholars of the fourth-rank Junzi Realm. Together, they could easily wield the carving knife.

"Moreover, Confucianism has always had enmity with Buddhism. The Academy led the campaign to eradicate the Buddhists in the past. That they would act now is unexpected, but understandable."

"We trust the National Teacher," Yuanjing Emperor said, his doubts finally eased.

After sending the Emperor off, Luo Yuheng walked out of her meditation chamber and sat in a pavilion, staring blankly into space.

.....

Xu Qi'an visited the Nightwatcher's constabulary to report his condition to Wei Yuan. Upon entering the Tower of Noble Spirit, he felt as if he were about to face a trial, with his heart beating fast as he rehearsed the lies he'd prepared to make them seem seamless.

Unexpectedly, Wei Yuan did not question him. After hearing that Xu's health had improved, Wei Yuan simply nodded with relief, invited him for tea, and talked about trivial matters.

Leaving the Tower of Noble Spirit, Xu Qi'an let out a sigh of relief.

\*After all, Duke Wei is just a regular person who doesn't practice martial arts. Though his theoretical knowledge is solid, he can't see through all the mysteries. Plus, he is a smart man. He likely believes he has everything figured out: the Jianzheng secretly helped me, and Cloud Deer Academy's intervention caused the appearance of the carving knife.\*

With this thought, Xu Qi'an smirked, feeling as though he had won a small psychological victory over Wei Yuan.

\*Everyone else is still on the second level, while I'm on the fifth.\*

.....

By dusk, Xu Qi'an, feeling quite relaxed, returned home. As he passed through the outer courtyard, the rich aroma of freshly prepared dishes wafted into his nose.

Auntie had ordered the kitchen to prepare a lavish spread, with even some dishes bought from a restaurant. It was clear the feast was to celebrate Xu Qi'an's achievements.

During dinner, Auntie grumbled, "I manage this entire household by myself, running around non-stop. It's exhausting."

Her casual complaint was immediately seized upon by Xu Lingyue, who said, "Then Mother, let me manage the household accounts."

This "account" referred to the household's treasury, the fine silks, and the lands and shops they owned. Auntie currently "managed" it all, though she was illiterate and relied on Xu Lingyue to help with the bookkeeping.

Xu Lingyue did much of the work, but Auntie held all the power. If Auntie decided to buy clothes for the family, everyone got new clothes. If she refused, no one did.

"You? Manage the accounts? Even if they were to be passed down, they'd go to the wives of Dalang or Erlang, not you," Auntie retorted, squashing her daughter's ambitions.

\*Even if it were Dalang or Erlang's wives, don't you dare think of taking my power...\* Auntie added in her heart.

After dinner, Xu Erlang put down his chopsticks and suddenly said, "Big Brother, come to the study. I have something to discuss with you."

Xu Qi'an glanced at his younger brother. Erlang's face was serious, his brows furrowed.

\*What now?\* Xu Qi'an muttered inwardly, following Erlang to the study.

Chapter 300. To Attend a Gathering

Entering the study and closing the door, Xu Xinnian stared at his older brother with an odd expression.

\*His expression's strange, but not anxious, it's not an urgent matter...\* Detective Xu made a quick judgment, sat by the round table, poured himself a glass of water to quench the thirst caused by too much MSG, and casually chuckled:

"Erlang, men shouldn't be hesitant. Just say what's on your mind."

Xu Erlang walked to the desk, picked up an invitation, and with a light tap, sent it landing accurately in front of Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an unfolded the invitation, quickly scanned it, and understood why his brother had such a strange expression.

The content of the invitation was for Xu Erlang to attend a literary gathering, with an interesting footnote: Bring your sister along.

The inviter was none other than Wang Zhenwen, the current Prime Minister.

"You are the Spring Exam huiyuan. It's perfectly reasonable for you to be invited to such a gathering," Xu Qi'an analysed.

Xu Xinnian had two younger sisters, but this sort of event wasn't for children. Surely a grand family like the Wang family wouldn't be unaware of basic etiquette?

As for women attending such gatherings, although the patriarchal society and the traditional virtues of women were still upheld in the Great Feng, the existence of cultivation meant that women could also be outstanding figures.

Thus, while women's status was still beneath men's, it wasn't so low. Women didn't need to bind their feet or wear veils outside, and they could go out whenever they pleased.

For instance, Auntie and Lingyue would often take some guards and go out shopping for jewellery every few days.

It wasn't unusual for female guests to attend such literary gatherings.

"Foolish!"

Xu Xinnian sneered. "The court is like a battlefield. While there may be many ignorant fools in high positions, the officials of the central government are not among them. Wang Zhenwen is the cream of the crop. His every move, every word, and every expression is worth deep reflection. If we fail to consider them carefully, we might not even know how we end up dead.

"Big Brother is Wei Yuan's man. Wang Zhenwen and Wei Yuan are like two fierce tigers at odds in the court, incompatible as water and fire. If he invites me to his residence, it's definitely not as simple as it seems on the surface."

Xu Erlang paced around the room as he thought out loud, "I, Xu Xinnian, am the huiyuan of the Spring Imperial Exam, with boundless potential. The Prime Minister is wary of me and seeks to eliminate me before I grow strong..."

“No, even if I were to achieve the highest honours, it would be easy for Wang Zhenwen to deal with me. The disparity in our positions is vast. If he wanted to, he wouldn’t need schemes or tricks.

“So, could it really just be an ordinary literary gathering? If I think that, I’d be underestimating my opponent and oversimplifying Wang Zhenwen...”

Feeling frustrated, Xu Erlang looked to his elder brother, frowning, “Big Brother, say something.”

\*I think your imagination is running wild...\* Xu Qi’an frowned and said, “Here’s what you can do: ask your fellow candidates if they’ve received invitations too.

“If they have, then it’s just a regular literary gathering. But if you’re the only one invited, as a student of Cloud Deer Academy, then there’s definitely something fishy going on.”

“I’ve thought of that already, but there’s no time.” Xu Erlang pointed to the invitation, “Look at the time, Big Brother. The gathering is tomorrow morning. I don’t have enough time to verify... oh, I understand now,”

“Understand what?” asked Xu Dalang.

“The Prime Minister is giving me no time to react. If I don’t go, he’ll spread rumors that I’m arrogant and aloof, ruining my reputation. If I go, there must be some scheme waiting for me at the gathering.” Xu Erlang gasped:

“Ginger is spicier when it’s aged.”

Hearing this, Xu Qi’an grew more alert, thinking that after their family had finally produced a scholarly talent, Wang Zhenwen was already out to get them.

But something didn’t feel right. He frowned and said, “You mentioned earlier that if the Prime Minister wanted to deal with you, he wouldn’t need to resort to schemes. Even if you became a top scholar, you’re just in the starter town, he’s already got a level 100 account.”

Xu Xinnian was confused, “What do you mean by ‘starter town’ and ‘level 100 account’?”

“If you don’t go, rumors of your arrogance will spread, but if you go, there may be a trap... It’s your decision, Erlang.” Xu Qi’an patted him on the shoulder in reassurance.

“When did you become as dimwitted as Lingyin, Big Brother?”

Xu Erlang wasn’t pleased, “I’ve said so much, and you still don’t understand? I want you to come with me.”

“No, you can’t bring me along. You’re my brother, but in the officialdom, we don’t walk the same path. Erlang, remember this:”

Xu Qi’an’s expression turned serious, as he solemnly said:

“You walk your own road, in your own direction. Don’t have \*anything\* to do with me.”

Xu Erlang was an intelligent person after all. After a moment of silence, he replied with a small “hmm.”

Big Brother was actually warning him to avoid any entanglement with Wei Yuan. Should the day come when Wei Yuan falls from power, Big Brother would inevitably be implicated.

But Wei Yuan’s downfall would have nothing to do with Xu Xinnian, whose only connection to this would be as Xu Qi’an’s cousin, not as Wei Yuan’s subordinate.

Xu Xinnian agreed with this reasoning.

In history, even within prestigious families, their members weren’t always united. They often belonged to different factions. This had the benefit of ensuring that even if one wing was clipped, the family wouldn’t be destroyed.

...

The next day, Xu Qi’an rode his beloved mare, clopping through the morning mist as he made his way to the Nightwatchers’ Constabulary.

After roll call, a few familiar colleagues, including Song Tingfeng, gathered around him. They drank tea, snacked on peanuts, and boasted for a while. Soon, they started urging Xu Qi’an to treat them to a trip to the Jiaofangsi.

"Piss off, piss..."

Xu Qi’an spat at them and cursed, “All you think about is going to the Jiaofangsi. Didn’t you watch my duel? What did that old monk beneath the Bodhi tree say? Lust is a bone-scraping knife, to be avoided.

“All you do is visit courtesans. Do you deserve your uniforms? It’s all good you whoring away, don’t drag me into it!”

His colleagues knew his true nature and weren’t the least bit afraid. They retorted, “Who in the Constabulary has been to the Jiaofangsi more than you?”

Xu Qi’an responded confidently, “I never pay for it, so how am I whoring? You all may be my friends, but slander me like this again, and I’ll report you to Duke Wei for defamation.”

“Bah!” they all spat at him.

But deep down, they admired Xu Qi’an. It wasn’t that he didn’t pay for courtesans; it was that the courtesans wanted to pay for him!

“Ningyan, I heard from Old Song that back when you were just a Bronze Gong, you and Miss Fuxiang were already together. Apart from that famous poem, do you have any other secret techniques?” a Bronze Gong eagerly inquired.

The Bronze and Silver Gongs present all perked up at once. Who wouldn’t want to be adored by the top courtesans?

“There’s indeed a trick to it.” Xu Qi’an gave a firm nod.

“What’s the trick?!” The Nightwatchers leaned in, breathless with anticipation.

Just then, a stern voice came from the entrance: “Gathering and chatting during duty hours—do you have any sense of discipline?”

The group turned and saw a Golden Gong standing at the door of the hall, his hawk-like eyes sharp as blades, with faint crow’s feet at the corners. It was Jiang Lyuzhong.

“Gold Gong Jiang...”

Everyone immediately straightened up, dropping their playful postures, and respectfully explained, “Xu Ningyan was teaching us how to sleep with an oiran without paying.”

“?”

Jiang Lyuzhong's sharp gaze swept over the group, then he sneered, "Dreaming your spring and autumn dreams... Alright, continue your chat, but don't linger too long."

With that, he turned and left, exiting the courtyard, and leaned against the wall while activating his fourth-rank martial artist’s hearing ability.

Inside the hall, the others nudged Xu Qi'an. "Ningyan, keep going."

Xu Qi'an coughed. "A bit thirsty."

Song Tingfeng handed him a cup of tea.

After taking a sip to moisten his throat, Xu Qi'an began speaking again, brimming with confidence. "Indeed, Lady Fuxiang fancied me initially because of a poem. But what truly made her unable to leave me wasn't the poem."

"What was it?" the others eagerly asked.

"Do you know what women despise most in men?" Xu Qi'an countered.

The Nightwatchers offered their thoughts, suggesting things like "no money" or "no prospects."

Xu Qi'an shook his head and looked around at his colleagues' faces, before gravely saying, "It's being overly familiar too soon."

What sort of logic was that? Hearing this, the Nightwatchers fell into contemplation.

"And how does this relate to Lady Fuxiang being unable to leave you?" Zhu Guangxiao frowned.

"When we first met, behind closed doors, she asked me..." Xu Qi'an put down his cup, his expression becoming serious and composed. He pronounced every word slowly and clearly: ““Can you perform?”

“In the end, I proved I could. That’s why she can’t leave me.”

In the ensuing silence, Song Tingfeng expressed his skepticism: "I suspect you're lying to us, but we have no evidence."

"That's normal. This isn't something the average person can grasp, especially men lacking the necessary... abilities." Xu Qi'an patted his shoulder and addressed the others, "I've told you the trick; whether you can comprehend it depends on your own insight."

"Overly familiar too soon... whether you can perform..." Jiang Lyuzhong muttered to himself as he left, finding these two phrases straightforward on the surface but feeling there was a deeper, more elusive meaning behind them.

\*Better ask Duke Wei about this. With his intelligence, he should be able to grasp this small secret instantly.\*

...

After dismissing his colleagues, it wasn't long before a clerk arrived. "Silver Gong Xu, Gold Gong Jiang sent me to ask if you still need medicinal ingredients for body tempering."

\*Did Old Jiang really come to ask about this earlier? Couldn't he have just sent word? He's probably here for the indestructible vajra body but was too embarrassed to bring it up...\* Xu Qi'an replied, "No need."

"Understood." The clerk departed.

Before long, the two key phrases "overly familiar too soon" and "whether you can perform" spread throughout the Nightwatcher Constabulary. It was said that anyone who could grasp the deeper meaning behind these phrases would be able to visit the Jiaofangsi and sleep with an Oiran without paying.

Don't doubt it—this came from the mouth of Silver Gong Xu himself.

For a time, intense discussions broke out across the various divisions.

At this moment, in Xu Qi'an's hall, the culprit behind all of this was about to be summoned by a guard from Shaoyin Courtyard.

"The Second Princess requests your presence."

"I know. I have some matters to attend to first; I'll go later," Xu Qi'an said, still seated behind his desk, leafing through dossiers.

The guard cupped his hands and left.

About a quarter-hour later, Xu Qi'an finally set down the dossiers and sighed in relief.

\*More and more jianghu folk are flooding into the capital. Once word of the duel spreads, I'm afraid even more martial artists will come to join the fun... While this greatly boosts the capital's economy, incidents of swindling, kidnapping, and even home invasions are occurring with increasing frequency.\*

\*If this continues, we need to address the issue from two angles...\*

Xu Qi'an waved over a clerk and instructed, "Draft a report."

Every Silver Gong's division had at least three clerks serving as secretaries. After all, while Silver Gongs were great at cutting people down, writing was another story... Xu Qi'an was about average in that regard.



Xu Qi'an submitted three proposals to Wei Yuan: first, to draw troops from the thirteen counties under the capital's administration to maintain law and order in the outer city; second, to petition the Emperor to have the Imperial Guards patrol the inner city; third, during this period, breaking and entering — execution! Robbery and mugging — execution! Provoking trouble and seeking conflict, causing injury or material damage to bystanders — execution!

The first two were preparations for the third. Harsh punishment was needed to maintain order, but it would inevitably push criminals to take desperate actions, which would require substantial manpower and experts to suppress.

This might lead to criminals becoming desperate and committing murder, but if they wanted to quickly restore order, they needed heavy punishment as a deterrent.

After finishing the report, another guard arrived—this time from Dexin Courtyard.

"Princess Huaiqing requests your presence, Sir."

...

Xu Manor.

Xu Erlang, dressed in a refined pale white robe, had his hair tied up with a jade headpiece. Fine jade hung from his waist—his own, his father's, and his brother's... In short, he had adorned himself with the most valuable pieces of jade the men in the family owned.

"Father and Big Brother are both martial artists. They don't even use these. Leaving them lying around is a waste," Xu Erlang had explained to Auntie and Xu Lingyue.

For the literary gathering hosted by Prime Minister Wang, which would surely be filled with the most talented scholars of the time, Xu Erlang felt he needed to look his best.

Auntie looked him over, satisfied, confident that her son would be the most handsome man at the gathering.

"Why are you taking Lingyue with you to the literary gathering?" Auntie asked.

Upon hearing the word "literary gathering," Xu Lingyin perked up.

"The invitation was written that way. Consider it an opportunity for Lingyue to broaden her horizons," Xu Erlang replied.

Auntie grabbed her daughter's hand, excitedly saying, "When you go to the gathering, keep an eye out. If you fancy any young gentleman, be sure to tell me when you return. With our family's current standing, marrying you into a noble house is well within our reach."

"Mother, what are you talking about? I'm not going," Xu Lingyue said, turning away in displeasure.

Seizing the moment, Xu Lingyin pounced on Xu Erlang. "If Sister isn't going, I'll go! Second Brother, take me, take me!"

With that, she clung to Xu Erlang's leg.

Xu Erlang tried shaking her off, but to no avail. The strength of Little Pea was truly terrifying.

"Alright, but you need to change into a pretty dress, or I won't take you," Xu Erlang said.

"Okay!" Xu Lingyin nodded happily.

With Auntie's help, she went to change. A few minutes later, Little Bean had her hair done up like an adult, wearing a dashing suit... but her brother and sister were already gone.

"Waaaaahhhhhhh!"

Her cries echoed through the courtyard like a pig being slaughtered.

...

Basking in the warm spring sunshine, the carriage arrived at Wang manor.