

Nightwatcher 301

Chapter 301. Fight and Scheme

Huaiqing also wants to see me!? Hmm, given my relationship with the two princesses, it's only natural that we meet after the magical contest... But, should I see Huaiqing first or Lin'an?

Xu Qi'an pondered briefly before coming to a conclusion: Huaiqing first.

His choice had its reasons. It wasn't about caring more for Huaiqing or less for Lin'an. Xu Qi'an's decision was tied to the intelligence of the two princesses.

Huaiqing was too clever to be easily deceived, and she was deep-minded. Even if she held a grudge, she wouldn't show it, but might strike back when you least expect it. Lin'an, on the other hand, was relatively simpler. She was spoiled and often unreasonable, but she didn't hold grudges. Once her tantrum was over, it would be forgotten.

"Very well, this official will accompany you to the palace," Xu Qi'an said, instructing his clerk to deliver his memorial to the Tower of Noble Spirit. He then mounted his horse and followed the guard to the palace.

After going through the necessary procedures, Xu Qi'an stepped into Dexin Courtyard, where he saw Huaiqing in the elegantly clean hall. She was wearing a white palace gown that suited her temperament, with her hair simply adorned with a golden pin, letting a few strands of jet black hair cascade down.

As cold as a celestial from a painting.

The strands of loose hair, however, added a touch of warmth and human charm to her otherwise aloof appearance.

"Are you well?" Huaiqing smiled faintly.

"No major issues. Your humble servant is as strong as an ox, a little rest is all I need to recover from such minor injuries," Xu Qi'an smiled back.

Huaiqing nodded with relief and invited him to sit. "With your victory in the contest, the court is sure to reward you. However, a rank promotion is easy, a title promotion is hard.

"If you're not in need of silver, you could make a request to the emperor, which would secure Xu Cijiu's future."

Whoever marries Huaiqing will be as lucky as Liu Bei getting Zhuge Liang! Xu Qi'an marvelled inwardly.

It was indeed a brilliant suggestion.

Sacrificing some personal gain to secure Erlang's career would pave the way for his younger brother to rise as Prime Minister.

"Your servant has already requested a crimson lettered iron deed," Xu Qi'an said with regret.

“A crimson lettered iron deed?” Huaiqing’s delicate brows furrowed. “What use is that? Once in a blue moon it may arise to miraculous effect, but more often than not, it’s worthless.”

So her point is, the interpretation of the deed’s guarantees lay entirely with the emperor, and given Emperor Yuanjing’s lack of trustworthiness, it’s as valuable as the paper it’s written on... to put it plainly, it’s like the fiat currency in my previous life. If a government had trust, then its currency had value. If a government didn’t have trust, well, then you get the Zimbabwean dollar... For Huaiqing to speak so openly to me, it shows how candid she is.

Xu Qi'an smiled faintly. “It may still produce miraculous effects.”

Huaiqing didn’t dwell on it further. She continued, “Have you truly mastered the Unbreakable Vajra technique?”

Xu Qi'an extended his hand, and his flesh quickly solidified with golden lacquer, his entire arm radiating a soft golden glow.

Huaiqing wasn’t pleased, however, and said in a low voice, “Do you realize how many martial artists would covet this Unbreakable Vajra?”

Xu Qi'an’s heart tightened, and he didn’t reply.

Huaiqing took a sip of tea and said, “You’re riding a wave of fame right now, so no one will target you openly. But watch those around you carefully, and take care not to expose any vulnerabilities.”

She paused for a moment and then added, “Duke Wei is not invincible.”

Given the immense power I displayed during the contest, the martial artists in the capital might salivate, but none would dare to act against me directly... And the major figures of the martial world wouldn’t come here to interfere with the Conflict of Heaven and Man, so they wouldn’t know about the duel... Huaiqing’s warning is clear.

Who in the capital would covet my Unbreakable Vajra?

The civil officials might be interested, not for themselves, but for their household bodyguards and loyal henchmen.

But it’s not something directly valuable to them, so they wouldn’t be overly eager.

It’s the nobles and the military!

“Thank you for the reminder, Your Highness,” Xu Qi'an said sincerely.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, Huaiqing casually remarked, “That storybook you gave me last time, my maids have been reading it, and they seem to find it quite amusing.

“Though we don’t read such things ourselves, we couldn’t deny their repeated requests... Is there a sequel?”

“If Your Highness would like it, I can bring it to you in a few days,” Xu Qi'an said with a smile.

Huaiqing nodded gracefully. "No rush, it's just for a few maidservants. Hmm, tomorrow would be fine."

Not in a rush, huh? You're absolutely dying to read it... Alright, I'll have my typewriter Zhong Li work on it when I get back... Xu Qi'an lampooned.

After some light conversation, Xu Qi'an found a reason to excuse himself and left Huaiqing's courtyard.

He returned to the palace gates, waited for the Imperial Guard's message, then re-entered the palace, heading toward Shaoyin Courtyard.

"Sir Xu, halt!" A guard raised his hand to stop him and said, "The Princess Lin'an has decreed that she will not receive guests today. Please return."

"But the princess invited me. If you pass on the message, you'll see," Xu Qi'an reminded him.

The guard, however, remained firm and shook his head. "Sir Xu, don't make things difficult for this subordinate. Please leave."

Assaulting a guard in the palace is a serious crime... Lin'an is definitely angry. She knows I went to Huaiqing's courtyard first... With these thoughts, Xu Qi'an quickly devised a strategy. Feigning anger, he said, "The princess personally invited me herself, and you refuse to pass on the message? Fine, whatever, I'll just wait outside."

...

A carriage of ordinary make stopped outside Wang Manor. Xu Xinnian opened the door, and stepped down onto the ground, on a stool that the driver had placed for him. Turning back, he extended his hand towards his graceful sister.

With the guiding hand of her elder brother, Xu Lingyue stepped down steadily from the carriage. Brother and sister handed over their invitation to the gatekeepers, and under their lead entered the manor.

"Second brother, you've had a lot on your mind the way here, are you nervous?" Xu Lingyue asked in a low voice.

"Even if your second brother were to see His Majesty today, he still won't be nervous." Xu Cijiu replied lightly. His face was serious, his brows furrowed, as he lowered his voice:

"When we get to the gathering, speak less and listen more. You're only here in company, nothing should happen to you, as for me..."

As for me, who knows, I may have to compete with the Prime Minister.

In fairness, all else aside, just this ambition and fighting spirit alone would set Xu Erlang at the top of his generation.

Wang Manor was huge, and brother and sister walked for a long time, passing through long corridors, before finally reaching a garden, with blue water and elegant rockery, young leaves just sprouting in the early spring, and flower buds ready to open. It was a very pleasing sight.

Within the garden came clear sounds of recitation, as well as much chatter and laughter.

Passing through the long corridor, Xu Erlang and Xu Lingyue saw two groups seated in an orderly fashion. To the left sat a dozen or so scholars in traditional Confucian robes, each one energetic and dignified. To the right was a group of young, beautiful women, dressed in various coloured silk gowns.

The moment the Xu siblings made their entrance, the atmosphere visibly froze, and the eyes of both the promising young scholars and the blooming maidens brightened.

Xu Erlang frowned slightly. This literary gathering was not quite what he had expected. In his imagination, the event would be presided over by Prime Minister Wang, where the scholars attending would nervously present their ideas and demonstrate their talents in front of the Prime Minister. If fortunate enough to gain the Prime Minister's favour, they would have a powerful backer for their future court careers.

Yet who would have thought the atmosphere of the gathering would be so relaxed, with fine wine, delicacies, fresh fruits, and... such a large number of young maidens.

"Young Master Xu, Miss Xu, please, sit."

A woman with refined features and an elegant demeanour stood up and gracefully bowed.

She was tall, with a face that was calm and graceful, yet her bright eyes sparkled with a hint of playfulness. Xu Xinnian and Xu Lingyue returned the gesture, and after a brief glance, Xu Xinnian walked towards the left side and chose an empty seat.

"Huiyuan Xu, long have we admired you."

As soon as he sat down, the scholars around him raised their cups in greeting.

As expected, aside from myself, there are no other students from Cloud Deer Academy here. These must all be students from the Imperial Academy... Xu Xinnian's heart tightened, but outwardly he maintained a calm smile and raised his cup in return.

He engaged in light conversation with the scholars for a while, somewhat surprised by their politeness. There was no subtle hostility or overt challenges.

With Prime Minister Wang's cunning, openly provoking me would be too crude... Xu Xinnian mused, nodding slightly. *As expected of Prime Minister Wang, his influence is palpable even in his absence, making me feel as though I'm facing an invisible pressure.*

On the other side, Xu Lingyue was seated next to Miss Wang, who smiled warmly at her, "How old are you this year, Miss Xu?"

Xu Lingyue replied in a soft voice, "Seventeen."

Miss Wang immediately said, "I'm nineteen, so I'll call you little sister Lingyue. Is that alright?"

Who is she, acting like the hostess... Xu Lingyue smiled politely, "As you say, big sister."

Miss Wang's smile grew warmer. "Then call me Sister Simu."

After a few casual words, Xu Lingyue learned the identity of this gentle and affable young woman—it was none other than the legitimate daughter^[^1] of Prime Minister Wang Zhenwen.

"Has sister Lingyue found a match yet?" Miss Wang suddenly asked.

Blushing slightly, Xu Lingyue lowered her head, "I'm not yet betrothed."

If a man had asked her this, Xu Lingyue would have been annoyed, but surrounded by women, and given that the question was posed in a low voice by the daughter of the Wang family, she felt it was bearable.

Miss Wang looked surprised. "Surely your brothers must be engaged by now. You should hurry as well."

Xu Lingyue glanced at her briefly and shook her head, "Neither of my brothers are married yet."

Neither are married? Miss Wang maintained her composed expression, but subtly remarked, "With the talents of your two brothers, I'd imagine they've had marriage offers lined up."

Around them, the young ladies perked up their ears.

Whether it was the dashing and unmatched Xu Xinnian or the valiant Xu Qi'an, the latter especially had just emerged victorious from a magical contest, making him a figure of immense curiosity among the noblewomen of the capital.

Miss Wang smiled graciously.

However, one exception existed—a girl in a purple gown spoke in a sarcastic tone,

"The Xu family has truly leapt through the dragon gate. Xu Qi'an was originally just a fast bailiff in Changle County, and Xu Pingzhi was no more than a *Baihu* Captian in the Imperial Guard. For such a family, it would have been fortunate if Miss Xu could have married into a merchant's family. But now? Perhaps a noble match awaits."

Xu Lingyue couldn't discern this girl's background, so she played the role of the wronged, meek girl, lowering her head.

Seeing this, the other ladies felt a touch of displeasure towards the girl in purple.

Miss Wang squinted slightly and said gently, "Yan'er, speak more kindly... Lingyue, Yan'er is the niece of the Minister of Law."

The niece of the Minister of Law... Xu Lingyue thought to herself, recalling the incident when the son of the Assistant Minister of Revenue, Zhou Li, colluded with the Ministry of Law to imprison her eldest brother in their dungeons.

So, she's an enemy.

"Yan'er is straightforward and means no harm," Xu Lingyue said with a forced smile, trying to suppress her inner grievances. "Indeed, my eldest brother is merely a martial man, and my second brother holds no official position."

The girl named Yan'er was momentarily at a loss for words. If she continued down this path, she would be forced to insult both Xu Qi'an and Xu Xinnian in front of everyone—one of whom was present, and the other had just won great renown.

"Alright, let's enjoy our tea," Miss Wang said, tactfully steering the conversation away.

The literary gathering continued as the scholars shifted from discussing poetry to state affairs, occasionally engaging in light banter with the noblewomen, creating a cheerful atmosphere.

Xu Xinnian found himself unexpectedly enjoying the discussions and, after finding an excuse, took his wine cup and wandered off, ostensibly to admire the garden, while deep in thought about Prime Minister Wang's true motives.

"The blooming season is nigh, yet they are withered?" He muttered as he stared at a pond of withered lotus leaves.

At that moment, a soft voice came from behind him, "These are red lotuses from Qingzhou. They bloom in winter and wither in spring. However, the climate in the capital is quite different from Qingzhou, so the red lotuses do not thrive here and have little ornamental value."

Turning around, he saw the woman with delicate features from earlier.

Xu Xinnian had already learned of her identity, and bowed slightly. "Miss Wang."

"Call me Simu," she corrected.

"Miss Simu," he said politely.

Wang Simu smiled faintly and cast her gaze over the scholars and noblewomen who had left their seats to explore the garden. In a soft voice, she said, "That poem of yours, _Travelling is Hard_, I have it mounted in my room and look at it every day."

"In terms of poetry, my elder brother's work is the finest," Xu Erlang said, before adding modestly, "But of course, true poetry is a natural gift, an occasional stroke of brilliance. I, too, have had my moments of inspiration."

Using his elder brother's poem to bask in the spotlight, Xu Erlang did so with a clear conscience.

After all, we are family, and what's my brother's is also mine.

...

Xu Lingyue sat by the pond, facing the gentle breeze, absentmindedly watching the scenery.

The literary gathering was of little interest to her. She wasn't part of that circle, and although the "young talents" her mother mentioned were decent, they couldn't compare to her eldest and second brothers, even if these men were all tribute scholars.

"Hmph!"

A cold snort sounded behind her as the girl in purple approached, glaring viciously at Xu Lingyue. "You little wretch, what kind of victim playing were you doing?"

Xu Lingyue raised her head slightly, speaking in a soft voice, "What is Sister Yan'er saying? When did I ever act the victim?"

The girl in purple sneered, "You dare feign innocence in front of me? You know very well what you did! A wretched girl from a family of crude martial men, how dare you sit here with us? Do you think you belong at this table?"

"Get out of Wang manor, and don't let me see your face again."

Xu Lingyue frowned slightly, "Is Sister Yan'er angry with me because of my eldest brother?"

The girl in purple snorted, "At least you know that much."

Part of her anger stemmed from Xu Lingyue's brother, Xu Qi'an, who had long been a thorn in her uncle's side. But another part of it was that this little wench had deliberately played the victim earlier, drawing sympathy from the other ladies and making her look foolish.

The girl in purple had never suffered such humiliation.

Her anger surged as she thought about it, and her jealousy over Xu Lingyue's beauty only intensified. She snapped, "A little whore like you, with no real tricks to your name other than your fox face, do you believe your old aunt won't sell you to a brothel and let you experience true misery?"

Xu Lingyue felt a pang of grievance, "My second brother brought me to this gathering, and we were invited by the Wang family. How could I leave halfway? Perhaps, Sister, you could help me?"

The girl in purple frowned upon hearing this.

In that moment, Xu Lingyue discreetly reached out and pinched the girl's waist, hard.

The pain made the girl in purple turn pale, and instinctively she pushed Xu Lingyue.

Xu Lingyue "fell" backward into the pond.

"Help, help... I can't swim, Second Brother, save me!"

Xu Lingyue cried out, her panicked shouts echoing through the garden and drawing the attention of the other scholars and ladies.

"Someone fell into the water!"

"Quick, someone save her!"

Cries of alarm filled the air as the crowd rushed over.

Hearing the calls for help, Xu Xinnian looked up and saw Xu Lingyue flailing in the water, clearly struggling. His face paled, and without even bidding farewell to Miss Wang, he dashed toward the pond.

"Splash!"

He leaped into the water, grabbing Xu Lingyue around the waist and lifting her out of the water. With the help of Miss Wang and the others, they pulled her to safety.

"Hurry, fetch my fur cloak," Miss Wang quickly instructed her maidservants.

A moment later, they brought the cloak, and Miss Wang personally draped it over Xu Lingyue. The latter, nestled in her brother's arms, began to cry softly.

The crowd gathered around, waiting to see how the situation would unfold.

Xu Xinnian's face darkened as he glanced at the girl in purple, then turned to Xu Lingyue, asking, "What happened, Lingyue?"

Xu Lingyue sniffled, her hair plastered to her delicate face, making her look all the more pitiful. Between sobs, she replied, "I- I don't know. This sister told me to get out of the Wang residence, saying I didn't belong here. When I ignored her, she- she pushed me into the pond."

The crowd immediately turned to the girl in purple. The scholars glanced between the fragile, tearful Xu Lingyue and the arrogant girl in purple, frowning in disapproval.

"I did not!"

The girl in purple's face flushed with anger as she pointed at Xu Lingyue, shouting, "You wretch, how dare you accuse me! You pinched me first. Don't believe her—she fell into the water on purpose. She's trying to frame me!"

A nearby young lady frowned and whispered, "Yan'er may be a bit spoiled, but she wouldn't push someone into the water."

The girl in purple shot her friend a grateful look and pointed again at Xu Lingyue. "She did it herself! She fell into the water on purpose to frame me. This little wretch is wicked at heart!"

The crowd exchanged uncertain glances.

Xu Lingyue, ignoring the growing stares, let her tears fall and sobbed, "Second Brother, has Big Brother offended someone? Sister Yan'er said that Big Brother often goes against her uncle. Since she can't do anything to him, she plans to sell me to a brothel."

Sell her to a brothel... Xu Xinnian's rage ignited, and he stared coldly at the girl in purple. "I didn't realize the young lady hailed from such a powerful family."

Miss Wang, feeling guilty, whispered, "Yan'er's uncle is Minister Sun of the Ministry of Law."

The tribute scholars suddenly understood, exchanging looks of realisation. Being well-versed in court matters, they were aware of the enmity between Xu Qi'an and Minister Sun. The most famous incident was the poem *The Case of Sangpo Lake, Given to Minister Sun* which still circulated widely and would likely be remembered for generations to come, leaving Minister Sun's reputation in tatters.

With that in mind, the idea that this girl had a reason to push Xu Qi'an's sister into the water seemed all too plausible.

"You..."

The girl in purple was left speechless. She had, in fact, said those very words. She wanted to deny it, but seeing the expressions of the surrounding scholars, she knew it would be useless.

"You said my sister pinched you? Where?" Xu Xinnian asked.

"My waist," the girl in purple spat, her eyes blazing with anger.

Xu Xinnian nodded slowly. "A clever scheme. You know that scholars are taught to avert their eyes from improper sights, so no one can verify your claim. Everything depends on your word."

The girl in purple froze. Suddenly, she realized why Xu Lingyue had pinched her waist, and now, there was no way to prove her claim.

"We could check," a young lady suggested.

Xu Xinnian nodded. "If she pinched you, there would be bruises. My sister is soft-spoken and poor at defending herself—she'd have no way to argue her case."

The girl in purple and her companion were rendered speechless by Xu Xinnian's pointed words.

Xu Xinnian smiled coldly, "If you don't give me an explanation today, this we won't rest with this matter."

The girl in purple, her eyes red with fury, pointed at Xu Xinnian and screamed, "Don't be so arrogant! You're just a mere huiyuan! Who do you think you are?"

"Smack!"

Xu Xinnian responded with a sharp slap across her face.

The purple-robed girl staggered a few steps, her cheek instantly swelling red. She covered her face, incredulous. "You... you dare hit me?"

Everyone was stunned, completely taken aback by Xu Xinnian's decisiveness—he had not hesitated to strike a woman.

"Everyone here is a witness. I'll take her to see the officials right now, and I hope you all will serve as witnesses."

After speaking, Xu Xinnian glared at the purple-robed girl, his tone icy. "I won't be taking her to the Ministry of Justice or the prefecture office. I'll be taking her to the Nightwatchers Constabulary."

Everyone's faces changed dramatically.

What kind of place was the Nightwatchers Constabulary? Once someone entered that place, not even the Minister of Law could save them easily. If the situation was taken seriously, pushing someone into the water could easily be interpreted as attempted murder. The Nightwatchers would have no problem with such a verdict.

Even if the Minister of Law did his best to rescue her, the girl's reputation would be ruined. After that, how could she marry into a respectable family?

Fear flickered in the purple-robed girl's eyes. She hurriedly walked over to Miss Wang and cried, "Sister Simu, please save me... I don't want to go to the Nightwatchers Constabulary!"

Wang Simu immediately looked at Xu Lingyue, but the latter coldly turned her head away.

This girl isn't simple either... Miss Wang thought, then turned to Xu Xinnian and softly said, "Sir Xu, Yan'er acted recklessly. I'll have her apologize and compensate Lingyue for any damages. Could we settle this here, for my sake?"

She was also in a difficult position. The literary gathering was being held at her estate, and if Xu Xinnian took someone away, it would strain the relationship between the Minister of Law and her father.

On the other hand, stopping Xu Xinnian would completely offend him. Wang Simu preferred to handle the matter privately and avoid reporting it to the authorities.

"Fine, for Miss Wang's sake, I won't report it," Xu Xinnian agreed.

With that, Miss Wang led the Xu siblings to a side room to discuss compensation and an apology.

"Yan'er is indeed spoiled and headstrong. She made a grave mistake and deserves to apologize and compensate... How about five hundred taels of silver?" Miss Wang suggested, her beautiful eyes gazing at Xu Xinnian.

"Money is a small matter; it's the attitude that counts," Xu Xinnian replied flatly.

Wang Simu glanced at the purple-robed girl, who, full of grievances, lowered her head and apologized.

Only then did Xu Xinnian nod. "One thousand taels. A single coin less, and this will be treated as attempted murder."

"...Fine."

Wang Simu said, maintaining her gentle smile.

"Sir Xu, please take Lingyue home quickly to change into dry clothes. We wouldn't want her to catch a cold," Miss Wang urged, smiling warmly.

She then ordered a thousand-tael promissory note to be brought, personally handed the banknote to Xu Xinnian, and escorted the Xu siblings out of the estate with many thanks.

In the carriage, Xu Xinnian handed the banknote to Xu Lingyue. "Sister, keep this well. It will be part of your dowry in the future."

He pressed his hand lightly on Xu Lingyue's shoulder, and a warm sensation spread through her body, dispelling the chill.

She exhaled comfortably and whispered, "Second Brother, it's my fault for causing you to leave the gathering early."

Xu Xinnian waved it off. "Leaving early is for the best. To be honest, I wasn't confident about going up against Prime Minister Wang. It's best to leave before he arrives—this is called taking advantage and avoiding harm, the way of a gentleman."

After a pause, he added, "But that Miss Wang, she's not simple at all."

Xu Lingyue said: "Miss Wang has an extraordinary demeanor and handled the situation methodically. She certainly kept things under control."

From start to finish, she had managed the situation, even though it had nothing to do with her. Her attitude of taking responsibility was commendable; she had the air of a leader.

Xu Xinnian smirked. "That's only part of it. After you fell into the water, she didn't let you change clothes at her estate. That was a display for both that brat from the Ministry of Justice, and for us."

"Lingyue, you deliberately fell into the water, didn't you?"

Xu Lingyue's voice was soft and sweet. "Second Brother, do you know why Big Brother is more likable than you?"

Xu Xinnian's competitive streak flared. "I've always been more likable than him."

Xu Lingyue shook her head. "If it were Big Brother, he would be fussing over me, apologising for not protecting me better. He would understand everything but never say a word."

Xu Xinnian's face froze instantly.

...

"Why are you crying?"

Miss Wang held a handkerchief, wiping away the purple-robed girl's tears, smiling as she said, "You're the legitimate daughter of the family. You've been domineering at home since childhood, and no one has dared cross you.

"You understand some things, but your temper—cultivated since childhood—makes you prefer being blunt. That's not the right way to handle things. When you marry, you'll have a hard time."

"It was that little tramp who fell into the water herself!" the purple-robed girl shouted in grievance.

"That doesn't matter. What matters is how everyone else sees it. If they think you pushed her, then you pushed her," Miss Wang said, smiling.

"Sister, you're not helping me at all," the purple-robed girl fumed.

"I can't win against those two siblings," Miss Wang replied, smiling serenely.

Her mood was excellent. She had gained much today. First, Xu Cijiu hadn't married yet and had no betrothal. Second, she had gauged Xu Lingyue's personality.

Third, although their interaction had been brief, Xu Xinnian's character and temperament had thoroughly impressed her.

Good-looking, assertive, intelligent, resourceful, and—most importantly—he was willing to offend the Minister of Law to protect his family.

Throughout history, there had been countless brilliant, cunning, and ruthless men, but none of them interested her. They only cared about their grand ambitions and rarely put their female relatives first.

To have raised such intelligent children and nurtured a genius nephew, the mistress of the Xu family must be an extraordinary woman.

A sharp glint of determination flashed in Miss Wang's eyes as fighting spirit filled her.

Chapter 302. Treat Oneself Strictly

Tower of Noble Spirit

Jiang Lyuzhong sat at the table, holding the tea brought by the clerk. Blowing on it to cool it down, he took a sip, and remarked:

"I remember having tea here with Duke Wei last year. It was refreshing to the mind, and the fragrance lingered on my lips for six hours."

Standing in front of the bookshelf, flipping through books, Wei Yuan, with his back to him, said lightly, "That was tribute tea from the palace, only three pounds are produced every three years, and even His Majesty rarely drinks it."

No wonder... Jiang Lyuzhong suddenly understood and curiously asked, "Such a miraculous tea, where is it grown?"

"It's grown in the capital."

"The capital has such fine tea? How come I've never heard of it?"

"A woman grows it. She's in the capital, so the tea comes from the capital," Wei Yuan's voice was gentle and mellow.

Jiang Lyuzhong nodded and didn't ask further. Although the tea was good, he, being a warrior, wasn't particularly passionate about tea. He came to the Tower of Noble Spirit today with a clear and specific purpose.

"Today, I heard Ningyan mention something. He's very popular in the Jiaofangsi, beloved by the oiran, and for a good reason," Jiang Lyuzhong said.

"Beauties love poetry, especially women of the night," Wei Yuan chuckled.

"It's not just that," Jiang Lyuzhong shook his head. "Besides poetry, he has two other secrets: 'Deep words without deep connections' and 'Are you able to?' I've pondered these for a long time but gained no insights... Of course, it's not that I want to become that kind of person, I'm just curious.

"With your vast knowledge, Duke Wei, both in celestial matters and earthly geography, I came especially to seek your guidance. Surely, with your wisdom, you understand it well."

After speaking, Jiang Lyuzhong saw Wei Yuan turn around and gaze at him deeply.

After ten seconds of silent staring, Wei Yuan looked away and casually said, "Lyuzhong, you've been with me for nearly ten years, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"For these ten years, you've been diligent and conscientious. I've seen it all and am quite pleased." Wei Yuan pulled out a book and said, "Alright, I need to continue reading. You may leave."

Jiang Lyuzhong left in confusion, returning to his post.

Before he had even settled down, a clerk came in, bowed, and said, "Gold Gong Jiang, Duke Wei has given an order."

"But he just sent me away..." Jiang Lyuzhong asked, "What's the matter?"

"Duke Wei said that Gold Gong Jiang has been diligent and conscientious and should continue to maintain that. For the next month, all night shifts are assigned to you."

After a pause, the clerk continued, "Duke Wei also said he hopes Gold Gong Jiang will pack up and move into the constabulary. You don't need to go home for the time being."

"???"

Is this the kind of order for a diligent and conscientious subordinate? Is this human speech? A full month of night duty? Doesn't that mean I won't be able to visit Jiaofangsi or even see any women for the next month!?

Jiang Lyuzhong was dumbfounded.

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Xu Qi'an waited for two hours. Two full hours.

Luckily, he hadn't drunk too much water, or it would've been embarrassing... The sun wasn't strong enough to highlight his sense of desolation... He waited patiently, without complaint or urging.

However, Xu Qi'an did notice that every quarter of an hour, a palace maid would sneakily stand in the courtyard, peeking toward the door.

Xu Qi'an pretended not to notice.

The sun shone brightly, the spring breeze was warm, and after the start of spring, the back garden of Shaoyin Courtyard began to awaken, gradually revealing its beautiful and charming side.

Likewise, the Second Princess Lin'an, who had alluring peach blossom eyes and a charming, flirtatious temperament, sat angrily in the pavilion, instructing her two personal maids on how to play Go.

After playing for a while, she had developed a fondness for teaching others how to play.

The two maids had no enjoyment in the game, but they dared not disobey the Second Princess, who was in a bad mood.

"Princess, Sir Xu is still waiting outside," a young maid came to report at regular intervals.

Lin'an responded with a composed "Mm," and there was no follow-up.

The maid withdrew.

After another quarter of an hour, she checked again and saw that Sir Xu was still there, which touched her heart.

Our princess always throws tantrums. Isn't she just pushing Sir Xu toward Princess Huaiqing...? This thought crossed her mind as she saw Sir Xu suddenly sway and fall to the ground, unconscious.

"Aiya..."

The young maid panicked and rushed over to check. She saw that Sir Xu's face was pale, and he was frowning in pain.

"Sir Xu, Sir Xu?" The young maid anxiously shook him, on the verge of tears.

Xu Qi'an "weakly" regained consciousness. He clutched his chest, coughed a few times, and waved his hand, saying, "I'm fine, it's nothing. It's just that my injuries from yesterday's duel were severe, and I stood for too long. My wounds have reopened, but I'll be fine after some rest."

The young maid, both pained and moved, advised, "Sir Xu, you should go back first. The Second Princess is in a bad mood and won't see you."

"Her Highness is upset?"

Xu Qi'an was taken aback and asked, "What happened? Who upset her?"

The young maid was momentarily at a loss, thinking to herself, *Aren't you the one who upset her?*

She quietly replied, "The guards at Shaoyin Courtyard saw Sir Xu entering the palace and going to Dexin Courtyard."

Xu Qi'an fell silent.

Seeing that he didn't explain, the maid was a bit disappointed and urged, "Sir Xu, please leave for now. Come back when Her Highness is no longer angry."

After saying that, she left Xu Qi'an and entered the courtyard.

She hurried to the inner garden pavilion and urgently said, "Your Highness, Sir Xu just fainted."

Lin'an suddenly raised her head, a mixture of surprise and concern flashing across her face before she quickly suppressed it. She coolly asked, "Fainted?"

"Sir Xu said it was because he stood too long and his injuries from yesterday's duel reopened," the young maid said with her head down.

"I didn't ask him to wait... You two fools can't even play Go properly," Lin'an angrily scolded before turning to the maid, "If he hasn't left yet, invite him in."

...

Xu Qi'an was brought to a side hall, where he drank cup of hot tea and waited for a long time before finally seeing the familiar figure in red walk in. She had a round face with delicate features, though her expression was cold. Her enchanting eyes feigned indifference as she scolded, "Did I not say I wouldn't see guests? Why did you let him in?"

With those words, Lin'an's gaze fell on Xu Qi'an. After inspecting him, she seemed to breathe a sigh of relief and ordered, "Since Sir Xu has served the court well, we cannot let you suffer for nothing. He'er, bring the items in."

The palace maid, whom Xu Qi'an had once playfully smacked, retreated and soon returned with other servants, carrying medicinal pills and tonics.

"These medicinal herbs and pills were taken from the Imperial Pharmacy. Sir Xu, please take them," Lin'an said with measured dignity.

"Her Majesty had to plead for a long time before His Majesty reluctantly allowed it," He'er added.

"Who asked you to speak?" Biaobiao's delicate brows shot up, but after taking a deep breath, she composed herself. "He'er, show our guest out."

Xu Qi'an did not leave.

A standoff ensued for a moment. Thick-skinned as ever, Xu Qi'an grinned and said, "I've studied the game of five-in-a-row for a long time and devised an unbeatable strategy. Would Your Highness dare to challenge me?"

Biaobiao, predictably falling for the bait, agreed.

Thus, a maid brought over the board and pieces, and she and Xu Qi'an engaged in a fierce game. Three rounds later, Xu Qi'an was defeated each time, leaving him with no choice but to concede.

"Your Highness is truly brilliant. I am in awe," Xu Qi'an smoothly flattered.

Lin'an raised her chin slightly and responded with a reserved "hmm." But just as she was feeling pleased, she recalled the man's usual ingratitude and added with a huff, "We've finished the game. We won't keep you any longer."

"Wait, I just thought of a new game. If Your Highness is interested, I can teach you," Xu Qi'an teased, playing his old tricks.

The once-quiet Shaoyin Courtyard suddenly became lively as Biaobiao began directing the guards to chop wood while Xu Qi'an split the logs into smaller sections.

"You, go fetch the dye... And you, bring the carving tools..." Biaobiao commanded the guards and maids with a smile on her face, her enthusiasm evident.

As the maids left, they whispered to each other:

"The princess was furious not too long ago, even throwing her teacup. Her eyes were red with anger... Yet look at Sir Xu. He didn't even say a word of apology, and she's already forgiven him."

"She was just venting. It's not as if she's truly mad at Sir Xu. Mark my words, if he left, then she'd really be heartbroken."

"Ahem ahem!" came a low cough from behind them. Startled, the two maids jumped like frightened deer, turning to see Xu Qi'an standing behind them.

"Sir Xu, how could you scare us like that?" He'er complained.

Xu Qi'an bantered with the maids for a moment before getting to the point. "Tell me, those pills are worth a city, when did her Highness prepare them?"

"They are the Emperor's personal supply, meant for replenishing qi and vitality. It's said that a successful batch produces only twenty-four pills. The princess had to plead with His Majesty all night yesterday before he finally relented and gave her one," He'er explained.

"And this morning, she immediately sent someone to fetch you, only to find..." another maid added before trailing off.

"Off with you now!" Xu Qi'an playfully swatted them on the buttocks and sent the maids away.

Returning to his task, he began carving the logs into flat discs. Lin'an joined him, and despite her limited abilities, she could still manage simple carving.

Unbeknownst to them, the afternoon passed quickly, and by the time the sun began to set, Xu Qi'an had finished crafting a set of Chinese chess!

Looking at the chess set they had made together, Biaobiao's face lit up with a genuine smile, a smile so radiant that it seemed to outshine the flowers.

"It's getting late. I'll explain the rules to Your Highness, then I'll need to take my leave," Xu Qi'an said, dismissing the maids with a wave.

Biaobiao glanced at the setting sun, her smile fading as she nodded quietly.

Xu Qi'an carefully explained the rules of xiangqi, but Biaobiao seemed distracted. She had been furious earlier, and though she had to admit that her initial attraction to Xu Qi'an was born out of a desire to take something away from Huaiking, she had grown fond of him over time. She gave him silver, treated him with sincerity, and asked for nothing in return except that he spend time with her.

However, she could never shake the thorn in her heart—his ongoing "inappropriate" relationship with Huaiking.

Though he had promised to serve her, he continued to meet with Huaiking in secret. She tried to ignore it, but today, after enduring her father's scolding and humiliation just to secure a pill for him, she had reached her limit when she heard her guard's report: *He's gone to Dexin Courtyard.*

For a fleeting moment, Lin'an felt utterly disrespected. She felt that she had been trodden over, that Xu Qi'an had never even treated her with a mote of importance — even treating her as an idiot.

So hurt that she cried.

"Alas..."

Xu Qi'an suddenly sighed, and whispered: "Your Highness, earlier I went to Dexin Courtyard."

Biaobiao's expression suddenly collapsed, and she turned her head: "I don't know a Dexin Courtyard. After you entered the palace, you came to find me."

"No, I went to see Princess Huaiking first."

"Xu Qi'an!"

Biaobiao shouted, turning back, her eyes red. *He even wants to tear down a lie I wanted to believe myself, does he care about my feelings.*

Xu Qi'an sighed again, his eyes looking far towards the setting sun, his expression becoming deep and melancholy, as if reflecting a countless number of years and experiences.

One word at a time, he slowly said: "Your Highness, do you know what they say?"

Lin'an remained silent.

"Throughout life, you will encounter many scenes and meet many people, but the final choice you make is what your heart truly desires."

Biaobiao was momentarily stunned, staring blankly at him.

"Today, both Your Highness and Princess Huaiking invited me at the same time, and without hesitation, I went to see Princess Huaiking first. Why? It's not because she holds more importance in my heart than you."

Xu Qi'an stood up, his expression somewhat animated. "If I had come to Shaoyin Pavilion first, I wouldn't have been able to stay long. After exchanging a few words, I'd have to leave and go to Dexin Pavilion. Ha, could I really ignore Princess Huaiking's invitation?"

"But if I go to Dexin Pavilion first, I can stay here with Your Highness until the palace gates close. Isn't it clear who holds more weight in my heart?"

Biaobiao's gaze gradually softened, her expression shifting from cold to gentle.

Xu Qi'an sat down again, looking at Lin'an with the same profound gaze he had when watching the setting sun. In a soft voice, he said, "Because I know, Your Highness, that what you need is companionship."

This statement hit the softest spot in Biaobiao's heart. Yes, she was lonely, isolated.

After the Crown Prince was confined, her mother constantly came to her in tears, filling her head with suspicions about the Empress. Her siblings grew increasingly distant as well.

Her father, the Emperor, was still the Emperor. But Lin'an was no longer the same. She had realized that her father's affection was only because she was harmless.

On the outside, she was a charming, proud princess, but deep inside, she was a lonely, isolated girl.

Xu Qi'an glanced around to ensure that the palace maids he had dismissed earlier were nowhere near. Then he boldly held Lin'an's soft hand, his tone sincere:

"Your Highness, I will always be by your side."

The warmth from his hand felt almost scalding. Lin'an's cheeks flushed red, and a warm sensation seemed to flow through her heart.

Time quietly passed as Xu Qi'an held her hand, not letting go, and a sense of intimacy and ambiguity brewed between them.

"Your Highness, it's getting late. I should take my leave. If you wish to see me every day, you could move to Lin'an Manor instead of staying in the palace," Xu Qi'an said in a low voice.

...

In the fading light of the setting sun, Xu Qi'an sat on his little mare, clop-clopping through the imperial city.

"Little mare, based on my many years of experience wooing girls, now that I've held Lin'an's hand, next time I'll be able to hug her.. Girls, after all, must be pursued. If you don't chase them, they'll never be yours.

"I once heard a joke about a lecher who told his girlfriend: 'Your parents treat you well because you're their daughter, but only I love you genuinely.'

"Although it's nonsense, I feel like there's some truth in it. Lin'an's affection for me is pure and sincere, with no ulterior motives or self-interest. Of course, the latter might be more reflective of the adult world.

"Even though she's a bit foolish, she's a beautiful vase, and she's emptied herself to be kind to me.

“As for who’s most suitable to be a wife, it’s still Chu Caiwei. Eating her soft rice is the best, with no side effects. Lin’an and Huaqing are much more dangerous.

"To be honest, with my current status, I don’t have many demands for women. I just hope they can strictly avoid any green tendencies."[^1]

At this point, the little mare nudged him with her head and snorted twice.

"Do you want me to set expectations for you too?"

Xu Qi’an thought for a moment and said, "For you, hmm... don’t let small fish slip by!"

...

At Wang Manor, after finishing his evening meal, Wang Zhengwen, who had returned from his duties, followed his routine of heading to his study to review memorials. At his age, women were already optional.

Perhaps influenced by Emperor Yuanjing’s rejuvenation, most of the senior officials on the court had distanced themselves from women, focusing more on health and longevity.

However, Emperor Yuanjing had the Human Sect guiding his cultivation and making pills for him—privileges that the court officials could not enjoy.

Wang Simu brought a nourishing soup for her father, using the opportunity of tidying the desk to sneak peeks at the memorials and annotations. Occasionally, she would even brazenly ask questions.

"I heard from the servants that at today’s literary gathering, the huiyuan from Cloud Deer Academy showed up?" Wang Zhengwen asked.

"Yes, and he had a confrontation with Minister Sun's niece."

Wang Simu recounted the entire incident to her father, then snorted,

"Father, I saw that Huiyuan Xu was a prodigy, which is why I invited him. But who would have thought he’s a sentimental fool, unable to show restraint—a mediocrity. Father, you should give him a good lesson, to vent for Sister Yan."

Wang Shoufu didn’t see things as superficially as his daughter and mused, “A scholar from Cloud Deer Academy, following the Confucian path, likely will not have too poor a temperament.

"For him to achieve huiyuan as a student of Cloud Deer Academy means he’s undoubtedly talented. As for the conflict among you youngsters, it’s not something to take seriously."

Wang Simu smirked and immediately said, "It seems your daughter’s thoughts align with yours, Father. Do you think it’s possible to recruit him?"

"Recruit him? Why would we recruit him? Even if he is talented, there’s no need to risk offending the civil officials from the Imperial Academy. Besides, I’m the Prime Minister, a leader among civil officials." Wang Shoufu shook his head.

"Precisely because Father’s the leader of the civil officials, if you make a move to recruit him, there will be less resistance. If we can bring him under our wing, it would not only suppress the arrogance of Cloud Deer Academy but also add a capable man to our ranks—a win-win."

Wang Simu looked as if she was analysing the situation for her father's benefit.

"Without a compelling reason, recruiting him would do more harm than good." Wang Zhengwen shook his head.

Wang Simu wanted to continue, but a glance from her father made her swallow her words.

She knew when to stop.

Without a compelling reason... Well, I need more time to observe him... Wang Simu thought happily.

...

The Welfare Hall, the Southern City.

In the wood shed, golden sunlight slowly faded, and Monk Jingchen soothed the "black dog", lulling him into a sweet dream.

"Amitabha!"

The middle-aged monk with thick earlobes and a compassionate face spoke in a deep voice, "It's a miracle that this child has lived until now."

"The arcanists from the Sitianjian have treated him, all thanks to Sir Xu," Hengyuan said beside him.

"Over the years, I've wandered the mortal world, witnessing countless sorrows and joys, realizing that all beings suffer. Often, I ponder why, with myriad Buddha lamps, the darkness of the world remains so impenetrable.

"Not until yesterday, when I comprehended Mahayana Buddhism, did I understand that seeking personal salvation, pursuing the fruits of an Arhat or Bodhisattva, is for the self—small aspirations. To save all beings is Mahayana. If everyone harbours compassion, would there still be a need for Buddha lamps? No, there wouldn't." Monk Jingchen sighed.

Hengyuan nodded, pressing his palms together. "Sir Xu is truly a divine being."

Monk Jingchen also pressed his palms together. "He is a natural-born child of Buddha, a great gift to Buddhism from the heavens. This poor monk believes, one day, he will achieve complete enlightenment and renounce the world to join the monastic life."

"I greatly look forward to that day," Hengyuan replied, his heart burning.

Monk Jingchen nodded and continued, "This child's body is weak, and his mind has been damaged. He will not recover fully in the short term, nor can he endure long travels. My suggestion is to send him to Qinglong Temple. As for you, it's time for you to head west.

"You know, beyond the eighth rank lies the third, known as *Vajra*. If you don't practice the Vajra Divine Art, you will never reach the rank of Vajra."

Hengyuan hesitated for a long moment before slowly shaking his head. "Just now, you said that cultivating oneself is the lesser vehicle, while saving all beings is the greater vehicle."

Monk Jingchen froze, then lowered his head in shame and pressed his palms together. "What senior uncle said is true. You indeed have greater wisdom. Very well, very well."

Though he had comprehended the Greater Vehicle of Buddhism, *Mahayana*, the ingrained habits of decades weren't so easily changed. This was the difference between sudden enlightenment and not-sudden enlightenment. Arhat Du'e had reached sudden enlightenment, so he no longer held onto such mental habits.

"Tomorrow, Senior Uncle will take us back to the Western Regions," Monk Jingchen said.

"So soon? What about the matter of the evil creature? Won't we investigate it further?"

"The evil creature has been free for several months; there's no rush. The Grandmaster wishes to return to the Western Regions first and spread the teachings of Mahayana," Jingchen explained.

After sending off Monk Jingchen, Hengyuan was about to turn when he suddenly noticed an old Daoist standing in the shadows of the courtyard, smiling at him.

"Daoist Jinlian?"

...

Xu Manor.

The setting sun lingered on the western horizon, painting the sky in brilliant shades of crimson and gold. Xu Qi'an rode his little mare back home, tossing the reins to a servant at the gate and stepping inside just in time for dinner.

At the table, Xu Xinnian recounted the events of the literary gathering earlier that day, briefly mentioning how Lingyue had nearly fallen into a pond.

"What? Lingyue fell into the water?" Xu Qi'an quickly turned his attention to his little sister, concerned. "Are you feeling alright? Any headaches or fever? Could you catch a cold?"

Xu Lingyue replied in a soft voice, "No, big brother, don't worry. I took medicine when I got home, so I won't catch a cold."

"What happened?" Xu Qi'an glared at Xu Erlang. "How did you take care of her? She fell into the water at a literary gathering—what good are you?"

Xu Erlang glanced at Lingyue, who quickly came to his defence. "It wasn't second brother's fault. He can't watch me every second. Besides, when I fell into the water, he immediately pulled me out. The one who pushed me was the niece of the Minister of Law, but she already apologised and compensated me."

The Minister of Law's niece... Xu Qi'an raised his brows and sneered, "Fine. I'll send someone to stake out the Sun family's residence. The moment she steps out, we'll run her over with a carriage and be done with it."

Then, looking guilty, he turned to Lingyue. “Sister, it’s my fault you got involved.”

Lingyue puffed up her cheeks in a pout. “Big brother, what are you saying? We’re family; don’t be so formal.”

What a sweet sister!

...

After dinner, Xu Qi’an embarked on his long journey of cultivation—breathing exercises, visualisation, studying the Heart Sword technique, meditation, and practicing the Invincible Vajra Art.

It reminded him of the overwhelming workload from his school days.

Suddenly, a thick fog enveloped his vision, and he found himself in the mist-shrouded world of Monk Shenshu. Passing through the layers of fog, he arrived at a dilapidated temple and saw the handsome monk seated in meditation.

Monk Shenshu looked at him with warm eyes and said, “I am about to enter deep sleep and will not awaken for a while, so I won’t be able to ensure your safety. I will give you another drop of my blood to help you practice the Invincible Vajra.”

“Your blood can help me cultivate the Invincible Vajra?” Xu Qi’an was startled.

Shenshu smiled. “You should understand that my undying body is based on something. This technique is difficult and slow for others, but for you, progress will be swift. With it, you’ll have enough strength to protect yourself.”

With that, Shenshu flicked a drop of blood into Xu Qi’an’s forehead.

Xu Qi’an was instantly ejected from the misty world, waking in his room.

Crack, crack, crack...

His body made popping sounds like firecrackers as his skin bulged with muscles and veins, which quickly turned a gleaming gold under the candlelight.

Xu Qi’an’s mind screamed, *Holy shit!?!*

His Invincible Vajra Art had already reached a profound level. Now, if he were to fight Monk Jingsi in hand-to-hand combat, the outcome would be uncertain.

Of course, he couldn’t let the Buddhist sect know about this.

Xu Qi’an dispelled the golden glow and sat at his desk, deep in thought. *Monk Shenshu, an immortal-like figure from the Buddhist sect... surely he must have practiced the Invincible Vajra Art as well. And the Jianzheng allowed a Dharma battle, specifically naming me to represent the Sitianjian...*

Why is the Jianzheng paving the way for me so blatantly? No, it feels like he’s treating me like a crop to be harvested later...

At that moment, a knock sounded on his door.

“Who is it?”

Xu Qi'an stood up and opened the door. Outside, under the night sky, stood an elderly Daoist with white hair, holding a horsetail whisk and smiling.

Behind him were the swordsman in azure, Chu Yuanzhen, and the burly monk, Lu Zhishen.

"You..."

Xu Qi'an was stunned. *Why have they suddenly come to my house?*

"I have a young friend in trouble and would like Sir Xu's help," Daoist Jinlian said.

Chapter 303. Frightening Bad Luck

A young friend is in trouble... is it Five, or some other junior acquaintance of Daoist Jinlian?

Xu Qi'an showed an appropriate expression of confusion: "Where is your young friend, Daoist? Do you need me to mobilize the court's forces?"

Daoist Jinlian shook his head and replied, "She's in Xiangzhou."

Xiangzhou lies to the south of the capital, about 400 kilometers away... not too close, but not too far either. Xu Qi'an frowned, saying, "Daoist, if you have business, I have no choice but to assist. However, I'll need to request a leave of absence from the yamen first, since the journey is long."

Daoist Jinlian nodded, "You can have a servant request leave on your behalf tomorrow. We'll depart tonight to save time... Oh, by the way, what about the Master of Prophecy?"

"If we want to locate someone, we'll need the help of her Qi-watching technique."

"She's at the Sitianjian..." Xu Qi'an sighed, then added jokingly, "Alright, I'll go to her mum's house and drag her here."

This Master of Prophecy must be a woman... Number Six Hengyuan and Number Four Chu Yuanzhen both made this mental deduction.

The three of them waited inside while Xu Qi'an went to the back courtyard, fetched his mare, and rode off to the Sitianjian.

The lights at the Sitianjian never dimmed. Xu Qi'an entered the grand hall on the first floor and asked the overworked physicians, "Can one of you senior brothers pass a message? I'm looking for Senior Sister Zhong Li."

The atmosphere immediately stiffened. The physicians exchanged glances before one of them replied, "Senior Sister Zhong Li is on the first underground level. Please wait..."

One of the white-robed arcanists entered the inner hall, and a few seconds later, a loud shout echoed: "Senior Sister Zhong Li, Young Master Xu is here to see you!"

Having shouted, the arcanist fled in a hurry, as if a wild beast were chasing him.

In the grand hall, the remaining white robes all dropped what they were doing and bolted for the stairs. In an instant, the hall was empty, save for Xu Qi'an.

After a few more minutes, Zhong Li appeared from the inner hall, her hair unkempt and draped over her shoulders. She wore a plain robe and kept her head slightly lowered.

The picture of a forlorn woman.

"I need to leave the capital for a short while. I'll be back soon. I need your help," Xu Qi'an said bluntly, without any pleasantries.

"Ok."

Zhong Li nodded succinctly, as obedient as a tool ready for use.

The two left the Sitianjian side by side—Xu Qi'an on horseback and Zhong Li walking. Her pace was no slower than his mare's.

Soon, they returned to Xu's residence and joined Daoist Jinlian and the other two members of the Heaven and Earth Society.

Chu Yuanzhen spoke up, "It's not proper to fly within the inner city. We'll head to the outer city; Brother Xu, please lead us out."

If it were just him alone, flying within the inner city would be permissible, and the city's experts, out of respect for the Human Sect, wouldn't intervene or attack.

But with a group, they couldn't turn a blind eye, which would put them in a spot of trouble.

With that, Xu Qi'an led the three out of the mansion. With him, a Silver Gong, leading the way, the Nightwatchers and the City Guards merely asked a few routine questions without causing any issues.

On the way, Daoist Jinlian looked at Xu Qi'an and said gravely, "Number Five has gone missing."

Chu Yuanzhen immediately turned to Xu Qi'an.

Xu Qi'an looked puzzled, "Daoist, what are you talking about? Oh, by the way, why aren't you possessing a cat today?"

Daoist Jinlian replied calmly, "Number Five is the serial number of a holder of a fragment of the Earth Book. You should be aware of this. Hengyuan was saved with much help from you. Uh, what's this about a cat?"

Xu Qi'an let out an "Oh," and said, "Nothing, I must have been mistaken."

Daoist Jinlian nodded in satisfaction.

Xu Qi'an also nodded in satisfaction.

Chu Yuanzhen glanced at both of them and then at Hengyuan. With a smile, he said, "So it was during the Sangpo case that you saved Master Hengyuan?"

Hengyuan put his hands together, "It was all thanks to Sir Xu back then."

Hengyuan had indeed been embroiled in the Sangpo case. He'd mentioned in the Earth Book fragment that he owed his escape from the Nightwatcher's headquarters entirely to Xu Qi'an. Now, it seems there's more than meets the eye—Daoist Jinlian has connections with Xu Qi'an through Three. This means Xu Qi'an is aware of the Heaven and Earth Society and the existence of the Earth Book fragments.

If so, then I'm even more certain on my hypothesis. Although Daoist Jinlian gave the Earth Book fragment to the Cloud Deer Academy student Xu Xinnian, he really wanted them both.

Chu Yuanzhen smiled without saying a word.

Once they reached the outer city, Chu Yuanzhen patted his back, and the Human Sect magical sword flew out, scabbard attached, and hovered in mid-air.

Daoist Jinlian took a paper crane from his robe, tossing it lightly. The paper crane transformed into a large bird, about seven feet long, and began circling above them.

"I'll go with you, Daoist!" Xu Qi'an said quickly.

Anyone could see the obvious choice—Chu Yuanzhen's sword was a standing ticket, while Daoist Jinlian's crane had a reserved seat.

Hengyuan and Chu Yuanzhen jumped onto the sword, which shot into the sky with a whoosh.

Xu Qi'an and Daoist Jinlian settled on the white crane, but then they realized there wasn't enough room for Zhong Li.

"Can Arcanists fly?" Xu Qi'an asked the "forlorn woman" below.

"No, only a fourth-rank Arcanist can use teleportation formations," Zhong Li replied, shaking her head.

Xu Qi'an glanced around and then looked at his own thigh, offering, "How about sitting on my lap?"

"No need!" Daoist Jinlian removed his wooden hairpin and tossed it to Zhong Li.

Zhong Li caught the hairpin, which guided her into the sky with a whoosh, closely following Chu Yuanzhen's sword.

Daoist, you've missed an opportunity... Xu Qi'an thought to himself.

The white crane flapped its wings and soared.

...

The sword, crane, and hairpin ascended higher and higher. Soon, the landscape below became a blur.

Whoosh... Breaking through the clouds, a sword and a crane burst into the open sky.

The night sky was a deep, serene blue, with a crescent moon hanging overhead. Below them, a sea of clouds stretched out, unmoving.

Everything was still, and silence reigned.

"We've reached the stratosphere," Xu Qi'an transmitted his voice.

The wind was so strong that he couldn't keep his eyes open, and his words would be torn apart by the gales if spoken aloud, so they had to communicate telepathically.

Daoist Jinlian also closed his eyes, using his spiritual sense instead. Hearing Xu Qi'an's transmission, he asked in surprise, "Stratosphere?"

"I just made it up. Daoist, tell me about Number Five's situation," Xu Qi'an transmitted back.

"After the last Heaven and Earth Society gathering ended, Number Five stopped responding. At that time, I could still sense the Earth Book fragment's location in Xiangzhou. The next day, however, I suddenly lost the connection with the fragment," Daoist Jinlian said gravely.

"Did Number Five encounter the demon Daoists of the Earth Sect?" Xu Qi'an's expression darkened as he offered his guess.

"It's possible," Daoist Jinlian nodded.

So that's why you invited me, Hengyuan, and Chu Yuanzhen to join you on this mission... Daoist Jinlian's survival instincts are pretty strong. Xu Qi'an nodded, evaluating their collective strength.

On the surface, Chu Yuanzhen appeared to be a martial artist, but he was actually practicing the Human Sect's swordsmanship. His true combat strength was likely at the fourth rank, and even if he hadn't reached it yet, he was close.

Hengyuan, who appeared to follow the Buddhist path, was actually a martial artist as well. It was hard to assess his true abilities, as they hadn't yet fought, and Hengyuan had little combat experience.

Then there was Daoist Jinlian. Xu Qi'an recalled that he had been pursued by a fourth-ranked Zilian all the way to the capital, which meant Jinlian's strength couldn't have been worse than fourth. The reason was that Jinlian hadn't been wounded by Zilian but by the demonic Daoist leader of the Earth Sect. Even so, he had still managed to escape Zilian's pursuit.

If we encounter the demon Daoists of the Earth Sect, then, anyone under third rank would be good as dead... Xu Qi'an thought.

An hour later, Daoist Jinlian transmitted a message to everyone: "We've arrived. The area within a hundred miles below us should be where Number Five disappeared. I still can't sense the Earth Book fragment."

The group descended through the clouds, diving toward the ground.

As they neared the surface, what was once blurry became clear. Xu Qi'an saw the outline of a large city to the east, with many villages and towns scattered around it like stars surrounding a moon.

The four of them landed in a forest. Daoist Jinlian and Chu Yuanzhen sat down cross-legged to recover their energy.

Hengyuan stood guard for them while Xu Qi'an wandered the forest, managing to catch two wild pheasants and a deer.

When he returned to the group, he asked, "Did anyone bring a pot?"

"I did," Chu Yuanzhen replied, opening his eyes. He was about to get up and fetch the iron pot from the nearby woods but changed his mind. Since Xu Qi'an knew about the existence of the Earth Book fragments, there was no need for pretense.

He pulled out his Earth Book fragment and took out the iron pot. The four of them set up two bonfires, one for boiling soup and the other for grilling.

Regardless of their cultivation system, after expending energy, everyone needed to replenish it. No one could produce strength from thin air.

"I also brought some wine..." Chu Yuanzhen said, producing two jars of liquor to go with their grilled meat and soup. He explained, "When traveling far and wide, there are two things you must always bring. One: pots and pans. Two: toilet paper."

Xu Qi'an raised the porcelain bottle he had and smiled, "Now there's a third: chicken bouillon."

Chu Yuanzhen immediately nodded in agreement.

Xu Ningyan is quite the character, how interesting!

Chu Yuanzhen doesn't have any weaknesses on him, but I can't give up, I must see him have a social death.

The two exchanged smiles.

After a hearty meal, Daoist Jinlian casually grabbed a dry branch to tie up his greying hair, but then his face stiffened suddenly.

"Where's that Master of Prophecy?"

Hearing this, Xu Qi'an's expression turned stiff. *Fuck, where's Zhong Li?*

"I remember she was beside us when we landed, but then... somehow, I just forgot about her..." Xu Qi'an turned pale.

"She must be nearby. Let's search the area. We need to be thorough, and hurry up," Daoist Jinlian said seriously. "This is more urgent than rescuing Number Five. Number Five might still be fine, but if it's the Master of Prophecy, by the time we're late..."

Hengyuan, unfamiliar with the Arcanist system, asked, "What will happen?"

Xu Qi'an replied gravely, "She'll be cold and stiff."

Daoist Jinlian silently nodded.

The four quickly spread out. After about a quarter of an hour, Xu Qi'an found Zhong Li. She had fallen into a deep pit when they landed and had been sitting there, unmoving, ever since.

It wasn't until she heard Xu Qi'an's voice that she climbed out.

Back by the campfire, Zhong Li sat with her back to everyone, hugging her knees, her frail shoulders hunched, her silhouette exuding loneliness.

"I didn't mean to forget you, please don't be mad," Xu Qi'an apologized again and again, explaining, "It's just I... I... I accidentally forgot."

Zhong Li remained in her seated position, ignoring him.

Chu Yuanzhen clicked his tongue, watching the scene unfold with an amused smile.

Hengyuan, with his hands together in prayer, couldn't understand. "There was no danger nearby. Why didn't she just come out by herself?"

"It wasn't dangerous for you," Zhong Li muttered softly. "Based on my past experiences, staying put and waiting for rescue is the safest option. If I had come out on my own, I might've encountered all kinds of dangers, like a meteor falling from the sky or a passing monster or evil cultivator.

"Misfortune can't be predicted, nor can it be divined. It could happen at any time, like just now..."

Before she finished speaking, the bonfire crackled suddenly, sending sparks flying that ignited Zhong Li's hair.

"Watch out!"

Hengyuan's face changed, and in a reflex, he grabbed the boiling soup and splashed it toward Zhong Li.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an leaped in front of her, using his Qi to sweep away the scalding soup.

Zhong Li clung to Xu Qi'an's leg, trembling.

Chu Yuanzhen was left speechless.

The scene went silent.

In the quiet atmosphere, Hengyuan pressed his palms together in pity and said, "Benefactor Zhong, even the thousands of Buddha lamps in the world cannot illuminate the darkness around you. Amitabha."

Daoist Jinlian and Chu Yuanzhen, following his lead, pressed their palms together and chanted, "Amitabha."

Daoist, aren't you from the Daoist sect? Why are you chanting Buddhist mantras?... Zhong Li's situation may be tragic, but for some reason, I still feel like laughing... Xu Qi'an silently grumbled to himself.

He reached out and patted Zhong Li's head as a gesture of comfort.

"When we landed earlier, I noticed something off about the Feng Shui in the area. There's a large tomb beneath the mountains to the south," Zhong Li said softly.

Chapter 304. Teammates that Makes One Feel Secure (Long)

"A large tomb?"

Upon hearing this, Xu Qi'an turned his head and gazed toward the mountain range in the south. In the dark of night, the mountains lay silently, nestled together, their contours resembling a blooming lotus.

After a few glances, Xu Qi'an, who didn't understand Feng Shui at all, withdrew his gaze. However, he noticed that Daoist Jinlian, Chu Yuanzhen, and Hengyuan were all watching intently, their expressions serious and focused.

Compared to them, my foundation is still too shallow. I guess it's also because the martial artist path is too low-class... -hey, wait a minute, isn't Feng Shui the specialty of Arcanists?

With that thought, Xu Qi'an asked, "Can any of you actually understand the Feng Shui of that mountain range?"

Daoist Jinlian withdrew his gaze. "No."

Chu Yuanzhen and Hengyuan both shook their heads as well.

You don't understand, yet you were looking so seriously, even more convincingly than me... the corner of Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched, and then heard Daoist Jinlian frown and say, "Even though I

don't understand Feng Shui, the flow of the earth's veins still tells somewhat. Even if that mountain range is a Feng Shui treasure ground, it doesn't necessarily mean there's a large tomb there."

True, Daoist Jinlian makes sense; a Master of Feng Shui can only see the Feng Shui; how could they possibly tell there's a tomb underground? Xu Qi'an turned to Zhong Li.

"The tomb has been excavated, and a thick Yin energy is rising to the heavens," Zhong Li's eyes glimmered with a clear light as she observed the terrain, speaking as she did so. "The shape is like a lotus flower, with the main peak facing east to absorb purple Qi. Behind it is a river, which probably has underground currents. The base is nourished by black water, forming a formation of three-flowers gathering at the top. If there is also iron ore in the mountains, then the five elements are complete."

The five elements are complete? Xu Qi'an thought and asked aloud, "So?"

"To choose such a Feng Shui treasure ground, the person buried in this tomb must not have been an ordinary person," Zhong Li replied.

"I'm actually quite curious. Apart from Arcanists, no other systems understand Feng Shui. So, who selected this burial site?" Xu Qi'an scratched his head.

Zhong Li answered, "Apart from Arcanists, Warlocks know a bit about Feng Shui, and the Daoist sects also have some knowledge."

Arcanists originated from the warlock system, so it makes sense that warlocks know a bit... But Daoists also understand Feng Shui? Xu Qi'an couldn't help but glance at Daoist Jinlian.

The others followed suit.

Daoist Jinlian shook his head. "The Earth Sect doesn't study such things, but the Heaven and Human Sects dabble in it. To be precise, the Heaven Sect gains this ability naturally after reaching a profound level of cultivation, becoming attuned to the world and sensing all things.

"As for the Human Sect, their cultivation involves karmic entanglements, requiring them to attach themselves to emperors, which leads them to actively study Feng Shui. However, they aren't as proficient as Arcanists."

Dean Zhao Shou once told me that things related to fortune and Qi are connected to three forces: Confucians, Arcanists, and the Imperial Court. Since the Human Sect depends on emperors for cultivation, why aren't they listed? Xu Qi'an pondered.

Zhong Li continued, "There may be a rare treasure within the tomb, but it is also accompanied by great danger."

She stared intently at the southern mountains, both eager and fearful.

Xu Qi'an exchanged glances with the members of the Heaven and Earth Society. Daoist Jinlian shook his head, saying, "Let's focus on finding Five first. We can talk about the tomb afterward."

Once we find Five, we'll return to the capital and pretend we never heard about this.

Hengyuan glanced at Zhong Li and nodded. "The dead are gone; there's no need to disturb them."

Chu Yuanzhen agreed, "Moreover, we are not fully prepared. The matter of entering the tomb should be considered more carefully."

Everyone's survival instincts are strong. It's comforting to have teammates that make one feel secure... Xu Qi'an felt deeply reassured.

As for how to search for people, after a brief discussion, they decided to proceed in three ways:

First, Xu Qi'an would use his identity as a Nightwatcher to mobilise the officials and militia of the local villages and towns for a search.

Second, Daoist Jinlian and Chu Yuanzhen, capable of flying with swords (or other objects), would be responsible for covering the towns and villages surrounding the main city.

Third, Master Hengyuan would inquire among the local martial artists and common folk for information in the city.

"Five is from the Southern Marches, with distinct features and an adorable, charming appearance. If anyone has seen her, they should remember," Daoist Jinlian said.

Adorable and charming... Xu Qi'an took out a few pieces of broken silver from his pouch and handed them to Master Hengyuan. "The best way to gather information is with silver; the second best is with fists. Master Hengyuan, feel free to use both."

Hengyuan accepted the silver and nodded.

...

Xiangzhou governed eight districts and sixteen counties, with Xiangcheng being the provincial seat, home to over five hundred thousand people. Although it couldn't compare to the capital, it was still considered a first-tier city.

At dawn, Xu Qi'an brought Zhong Li into the city. The streets were mostly empty, with only a few vendors setting up stalls and artisans starting their early work. Most commoners were still in bed.

However, the brothels and entertainment venues had already opened early, with clients yawning as they left, shivering in the chilly morning breeze before dispersing.

I wonder how the brothels in Xiangcheng compare to those in the capital. Are the performances good? Are the women charming? Xu Qi'an pondered, but resolutely left the brothels behind after asking a passerby for directions to the government office.

Upon entering the government office, his Silver Gong badge granted him an audience with the magistrate of Xiangzhou.

Magistrate Li was a rotund middle-aged man who greeted Xu Qi'an with utmost politeness.

Xu Qi'an sipped his tea and said, "I need to find a young woman from the Southern Marches, very beautiful, with distinct features. I hope Magistrate Li can mobilise his people for a search.

"Once there's any news, post an announcement at the city gate. I'll check it myself."

Magistrate Li nodded, "Rest assured, Sir Xu. this official will see to it."

Satisfied, Xu Qi'an took another sip of tea and asked, "Has anything unusual happened in the Xiangcheng area recently? Any strange individuals or battles nearby?"

Magistrate Li thought for a moment before shaking his head. "None."

After Xu Qi'an left, Magistrate Li summoned his deputy to relay the task.

"Isn't this like searching for a needle in a haystack? Though people from the Southern Marches are distinct, Xiangcheng is large. How are we supposed to find her?" The deputy, hearing it was a thankless task, felt reluctant.

"Silver Gong Xu Qi'an... I feel like I've heard that name before." Magistrate Li furrowed his brows. "Fetch yesterday's court bulletin."

The prefecture had received a bulletin from the imperial court the day prior, announcing a grand victory of the Sitianjian against the Western Region's Buddhists, instructing all provinces and prefectures to publicly post the news.

When the bulletin arrived, Magistrate Li's eyes lingered on one particular line: "Silver Gong Xu Qi'an, standing in for the Sitianjian in the contest."

The moment dawned on him—this was no ordinary visitor. He turned to the prefect's assistant with a serious tone. "Handle this matter diligently. The Silver Gong who just left is none other than the renowned figure mentioned in the bulletin."

The assistant nodded emphatically. "I'll see to it at once."

...

As the sun climbed higher, Xu Qi'an wandered the city with Zhong Li, inquiring among various martial artists, but no valuable clues surfaced.

Logically, if Five really encountered a Daoist from the Earth Sect, she's likely in grave danger—or worse, captured...

Daoist Jinlian wouldn't have brought us all this way to search blindly unless he thought Five could escape from the Earth Sect. If that's true, there must be traces of battle in this area. But from what I gathered at the government office, no reports of such incidents have surfaced. If there had been a clash significant enough to attract attention, the authorities would have already been notified. Of course, it's possible Magistrate Li is concealing something, but after so much asking around, I haven't heard a single strange tale. Common folk love to gossip, after all...

His thoughts drifting, Xu Qi'an looked towards a nearby Goulan and led Zhong Li in. "We've been searching all morning—let's take a break, grab something to eat."

Zhong Li hesitated for a moment but followed him obediently.

"Welcome, honoured guests."

A young servant in blue clothes greeted them warmly, ushering them into the establishment.

"Find us a private room on the second floor. Good food and fresh fruit," Xu Qi'an said smoothly, tossing a small silver piece to the servant, a move well-practiced by him.

The servant glanced at Zhong Li, his smile widening. "Please, upstairs this way."

Usually, bringing a girl to the Goulan would mean the guest was purely there to watch plays. However, there were exceptions — those who liked brining women from outside to play.

These women were usually not of reputable backgrounds, and couldn't really appear around one's house — hence the Goulan.

This guest is certainly handsome, who knew that he would like this kind of unkempt chick... the blue-clothed servant thought, as he lead them with light steps to a quiet booth on the second floor.

"Who exactly are you looking for?" Zhong Li asked softly between bites.

"A member of a hidden organisation—the one founded by Daoist Jinlian of the Earth Sect."

Xu Qi'an wasn't worried about revealing his secrets to his typewriter.

Zhong Li chewed slowly, and Xu Qi'an could only see her small, rosy lips as she ate, not her face. Those lips, he noticed, were quite lovely.

"His soul is incomplete," Zhong Li suddenly remarked.

"What?" Xu Qi'an was taken aback.

Instead of elaborating, she continued, "It's like your companion in the Jiaofangsi—her soul doesn't fully align with her body."

After a long silence, Xu Qi'an nodded, keeping his tone casual. "Oh."

"Is that artefact in your possession the Earth Book?" she asked next.

Xu Qi'an nodded again.

"The Earth Book is an ancient treasure, said to date back to the era of the Human Sovereigns. It was a divine creation but later shattered," Zhong Li said.

"How did it break?" Xu Qi'an's curiosity was piqued.

"I once overheard Teacher Jianzheng mention that it was likely the Daoist Venerable who shattered it." Taking a sip of wine, she explained further, "The Sitianjian keeps a record of powerful artefacts in a special ledger—it was compiled by Teacher himself."

The Earth Book was critical to Daoist Jinlian's plan to cleanse his sect. If it fell into the hands of the Earth Sect's renegades, the consequences would be dire. Xu Qi'an knew this, and it was clear that Daoist Jinlian was likely anxious, even if he didn't show it.

...

Meanwhile, Daoist Jinlian, riding on a paper crane, soared across the lands below, his face clouded with concern. Xu Qi'an had guessed correctly—he was indeed worried.

When Five had failed to respond through the Earth Book, he'd immediately sensed something was wrong. When the fragment itself fell out of contact, his worst fears were confirmed.

"Who could have foreseen Five's luck being this bad? She's no weakling. Even if she encountered a demon daoist from the Earth Sect, she should've been able to escape..."

After the incident with Zilian, the demon daoists wouldn't be so careless as to parade the Earth Book fragments around. It was likely they would keep it hidden away in the Earth Sect.

Without retrieving the fragment, Jinlian's grand plan would be thwarted halfway.

For now, all he could do was pray that Five hadn't been captured. If so, she might still be rescued. As for the fragment...

"Fate can be cruel," Daoist Jinlian sighed bitterly to himself.

Elsewhere, Chu Yuanzhen was flying rapidly on his sword, his sharp eyes scanning the ground for any sign of battle.

If we can't recover the Earth Book fragment, the newly restored communication in the Heaven and Earth Society will once again be silenced. Without the ability to exchange information, the members who've grown close will drift apart. And most importantly, Daoist Jinlian's plan to purge his sect will be in jeopardy.

We promised to help him with this. Now, the risk has increased.

Just then, all the holders of the earth book simultaneously felt a lurch in their hearts.

【TWO: I plan to visit Jiangzhou to investigate a case, and afterward, I'll head to the capital, eliminating evil along the way. Hmm, let's delay the Conflict of Heaven and Man for a few days. I'll come to the capital after the palace examination.】

After the palace examination, that would be in twenty days—not too late... Chu Yuanzhen had a vague suspicion that Li Miaozen was about to break through, which was why she kept postponing.

This shows that she isn't very confident about the Conflict of Heaven and Man, which is good for me. But if she successfully breaks through to the fourth rank, then it'll definitely be a life-or-death struggle that can't be avoided.

【SIX: Something happened to Number Five. She disappeared in Xiangzhou, and Daoist Jinlian lost the connection with the Earth Book fragment. It's very likely that she was captured by the demon daoists of the Earth Sect.】

After a brief silence, Number Two's message came, long and urgent:

【Are you sure she was captured by a demon daoist of Earth Sect? Xiangzhou, right? Is Daoist Jinlian in Xiangzhou too? I'll head over immediately to help find Number Five. She's been missing for several days, has Daoist Jinlian found any clues? How could that girl be so unlucky? What were the elders of the Southern Marches thinking, sending such an inexperienced girl abroad without protection? These barbarians truly are barbaric...】

Number Two's nagging was laced with urgency, evident to anyone who heard it.

【ONE: If she encountered a demon daoist of Earth Sect in Xiangzhou, then there must have been a fight. Seek help from the local authorities.】

At that moment, Daoist Jinlian sent a message: 【Number Two, you don't need to come. It's pointless. Number Four and Number Six are already in Xiangzhou.】

A few seconds later, Daoist Jinlian sent another message: 【Do your best, the rest is up to fate.】

Anyone could sense the helplessness in his words. The members of the Heaven and Earth Society were weighed down with worry—both concern over the treasured artefact falling into the hands of the demon daoists, and fear for Number Five's safety.

...

Hmm, Daoist Jinlian didn't mention me. Looks like the identity of 'Cat Daoist' really makes him wary. As I suspected, one should never reveal an eccentricity to others—once people know, it's like handing them a weakness. Xu Qi'an chuckled to himself.

Then, he looked at Zhong Li, "You full?"

"Mm!" Zhong Li nodded obediently.

"I have a bold idea," Xu Qi'an suddenly said.

"I suggest you hide that bold idea," Zhong Li said cautiously.

A few minutes later, the trembling Fifth Senior Sister of the Sitianjian was dragged by Xu Qi'an onto the bustling street.

"Just point us in the right direction using your Master of Prophecy abilities. I feel that we might find a clue."

"Based on my experience, even if we find a clue, it will probably lead to a worse outcome," Zhong Li reminded him.

Sunlight fell upon her, and her hair glistened with a rainbow of colours. She was actually quite clean, just unkempt, which made people mistake her for a scruffy girl.

"Don't forget, I have great luck. I can offset some of your bad luck."

Zhong Li was successfully persuaded. She had a naturally agreeable personality lacked firm opinions.

She lowered her head, and her pupils took on a strange, fixed pattern, glowing faintly. After a few seconds, her voice became distant and hollow: "Head three miles south, and you'll find a clue—azure clothing... a man... anxious... afraid..."

After speaking, she collapsed weakly.

"As a Master of Prophecy, I can only predict once per day, and after that, my bad luck escalates to divine retribution. Without great fortune or a special protection array, I won't survive four hours."

Master of Prophecy... perpetually cursed with bad luck, and revealing the secrets of heaven leads directly to divine retribution? Knowing the Jianzheng's style, this whole Arcanist system feels like it was designed for schemers—cunning manipulators behind the scenes... Xu Qi'an thought, as he carried Zhong Li on his back.

"I'll carry you."

She's unexpectedly well-endowed! The sensation against his back, soft and ample, made him add a silent note in his mind.

The three-mile journey was not uneventful. Xu Qi'an encountered a horse that ran wild in the street, two runaway carriages, and a martial artist who mistook Zhong Li for his eloping wife and tried to kill them in a rage.

Why does this feel like a journey to the West? Is this woman poisonous... Xu Qi'an internally grumbled.

"Sorry, I've dragged you into this," Zhong Li said apologetically.

"It's nothing, really. I, Xu Qi'an, have weathered all sorts of storms. I certainly don't blame you," he reassured her.

"I... I can use the Qi-watching technique..." she muttered.

"..."

Xu Qi'an pretended not to hear that. He scanned the area and spotted a man in azure clothing sitting cross-legged by the roadside with a sign in front of him. The sign read:

"Urgent help needed from experts seventh rank or above. Generous rewards. No time-wasters."

What is this strong sense of déjà-vu... Xu Qi'an walked closer, staring at the man in azure for a moment before saying, "Brother, what trouble are you in?"

The man in azure gave him a cold look, didn't answer, and pointed at the sign.

Just as Xu Qi'an was about to speak, a furious shout came from behind him: "You bastard! You killed my entire family! Today, I'll have your blood for my blood!"

Turning around, Xu Qi'an saw a burly Jianghu warrior charging at him with a steel sabre in hand.

"Hah!"

The sabre slashed toward his head.

The man in azure's expression changed, and he shouted, "Watch out!"

But Xu Qi'an didn't dodge. The sabre hit his head with a "clang," and the blade curled into a spiral.

The man in azure stared wide-eyed, his voice trembling, "S-s-sixth rank?!"

The enraged martial artist also snapped out of it, realising that he had attacked a sixth-rank warrior with Bronze Skin and Iron Bones. His face turned pale as he dropped to his knees and begged for mercy, "Forgive me, great hero! I made a mistake! I didn't realise who you were!"

"Fuck off!"

Xu Qi'an kicked him away and then looked at the man in azure. "My humble skills—are they good enough to help?"

"Of course of course..."

The man in azure was overjoyed, unable to contain his excitement. "Please help me, hero. We can discuss the reward—anything is fine."

He could hardly believe his luck. Meeting a sixth-rank warrior felt like a pork bun had just dropped from heaven.

“Hero, let’s talk somewhere else,” the man in azure said.

Changing locations would only bring more trouble. Better to stay put... Xu Qi'an suddenly understood why Zhong Li never crawled out of the pit.

When faced with an unknown crisis, staying in place and waiting for rescue was indeed the best option. She had that down so well, it was heartbreaking.

“Alright... fine...” The man in azure finally gave in, coughed, and lowered his voice, “My name is Qian You, and I’m the helm master of the Houtu Gang.”

What a great name! Xu Qi'an asked, confused, “Houtu Gang?”

Qian You, a little embarrassed, explained, “We specialise in excavating ancient ruins and tombs, bringing the buried treasures back to light.”

Oh, tomb raiders! No, wait... grave diggers! Xu Qi'an understood.

Qian You kept a close eye on Xu Qi'an's expression and, seeing no disgust, continued, “Late last year, our gang’s guest elder discovered a feng shui treasure outside Xiangcheng. There was likely a grand tomb hidden beneath it.

“After some digging, we confirmed it. But our vice helm master warned that the tomb was filled with filthy miasma, likely harbouring evil creatures. Our Houtu Gang alone couldn't handle it...”

“Wait!” Xu Qi'an interrupted, staring at him suspiciously. “How did your vice helm master know the tomb was full of filthy miasma?”

Qian You puffed up his chest proudly. “Our vice helm master is an arcanist, a rare breed in the Jianghu.”

An arcanist?! Xu Qi'an glanced at Zhong Li, noticing her expression remained unchanged. He remembered hearing about wild arcanists before. The arcanist system had existed six hundred years, which was extremely short compared to other systems.

But then the Dynasty of Feng was also six hundred years old.

Apart from the Sitianjian, wild arcanists did exist throughout the land.

“What’s his rank?” Xu Qi'an asked.

“A seventh-rank Master of Feng Shui,” Qian You replied.

Just as I thought. For wild arcanists, seventh rank is about their limit. Sixth-rank alchemists need to rely on the royal court and the people’s “approval”, something most wild arcanists can’t achieve.

Xu Qi'an nodded. “Go on.”

“We spent three months preparing—hiring experts, gathering tools, including items of pure Yang to suppress the filth and yin energy in the tomb. Only recently did we feel ready to enter. But...”

Qian You’s face turned pale, anxiety and worry flooding his eyes.

“But our gang leader and the others never returned. I know they ran into trouble, but I’m too weak to help them. So I’ve been here recruiting someone stronger to help.”

That tomb must be extremely dangerous if it managed to cause a group of professionals to overturn their boats... The authorities typically don’t handle these kinds of things, and they’d likely arrest him if he tried. That’s why he’s ‘set up shop’ here... Wait!

Xu Qi'an’s mind raced as he quickly asked, “You mentioned hiring experts earlier. Did you happen to recruit a girl from the Southern Marches? Strong, skilled, and looks like a real fighter?”

Qian You looked at him, confused. “How did you know? There was indeed a young woman from the Southern Marches. She’s incredibly strong but was penniless after her long journey. She hadn’t eaten for three days.

“Our gang leader treated her to a big meal and promised her room and board if she helped us in the tomb. She agreed.”

So that’s it. No wonder Zhong Li’s prophecy pointed me to this guy. Five wasn’t captured; she just got into trouble while tomb raiding... But why did the Earth Book fragment get blocked?

For a meal and some traveling expenses, this foolish girl agreed to go down into a tomb. _Is this what they mean by ‘a beast-man will never be enslaved unless you provide room and board’?_

Xu Qi'an mind was filled with curses.

Seeing him lost in thought, Qian You hurriedly added, “There are treasures in the tomb. If you’re willing to help, not only will you get a share of the loot, but our gang will also reward you handsomely.”

Xu Qi'an glanced at him. “Since you’re out of options, reporting this to the authorities would be safer.”

“If I report this, I’ll be the first one arrested. Besides, the officials wouldn’t be in a rush to rescue anyone. It’s not reliable,” Qian You shook his head frantically.

“I’ll take the job,” Xu Qi'an nodded.

...

Half an hour later, Qian You followed the formidable sixth-rank martial artist out of the city. Surprisingly, they weren’t heading to the southern mountains but toward the north.

Qian You reminded him several times they were going the wrong way, but Xu Qi'an ignored him and explained, “I’m gathering a few friends to help.”

Along the way, Qian You’s confidence gradually turned to fear... The reason? This sixth-rank martial artist was incredibly unlucky.

First, they were nearly run over by a cart. Then someone mistook Xu Qi'an for an enemy, and finally, he was nearly arrested by constables who mistook him for a notorious bandit.

Several times, Qian You himself was almost caught up in the bad luck.

Is this guy cursed? Can someone like this really go tomb raiding without causing even more trouble?

As doubts filled his mind, Qian You quietly considered backing out.

"You should wait from a distance, and make sure to cover your ears," Xu Qi'an instructed.

"Understood!" Qian You nodded and darted into the forest, fleeing as fast as he could.

This man is strong, but his luck is so bad even I can tell something's wrong... I'll just return to the city and find a new place to look for help...

Qian You's mood grew heavy, but then a deafening roar erupted behind him, shaking the forest and nearly knocking him unconscious. Blood rushed to his head, his ears ringing, and he immediately crouched down and covered his ears.

Several minutes passed before he regained his senses, shaking his aching head.

What just happened? he wondered in terror.

Through the ringing in his ears, he vaguely heard a sharp whistling sound. Looking up, he saw a sword beam streaking through the sky, with a man in azure standing upon it.

From another direction, a paper crane flew in, with an old Daoist sitting atop it.

Both were clearly headed toward the unlucky sixth-rank martial artist.

"I- immortals..." Qian You muttered, stunned.

He hadn't expected that the expert he casually encountered by the roadside was not only a sixth-rank master but also had friends capable of flying through the air and traversing the ground. It was like stumbling upon a treasure.

With these powerful individuals assisting, how could they not rescue the gang leader and the others?

I need to go back, right now. I have to cling to this thigh for dear life!

This thought took root in his mind with absolute certainty.

I can't use the Earth Book fragment, or I'll expose my identity. Luckily, I've got a loud voice, I can shout loud enough... Xu Qi'an glanced at Daoist Jinlian and Chu Yuanzhen as they approached swiftly and said, "Master Hengyuan is still in the city, Daoist. You should notify him."

Daoist Jinlian leaped off the paper crane and, while taking out his Earth Book fragment, urgently asked, "Did you discover any clues?"

Chu Yuanzhen looked at Xu Qi'an expectantly.

“There’s good news and bad news,” Xu Qi’an said after a moment of deliberation. “The good news is, I know where your young friend is. She wasn’t captured by the demon daoists of the Earth Sect, but she’s in a different kind of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Daoist Jinlian pressed.

At that moment, Master Hengyuan arrived. He had heard the faint sound of a lion’s roar while still in the city and guessed it was Xu Qi’an calling for everyone. Considering the crowds in the city, he couldn’t display his full speed, so he patiently left the city before sprinting with all his might.

Upon hearing that Xu Qi’an had found a clue about Five, Hengyuan put his palms together in relief, chanting a Buddhist prayer before eagerly turning to Xu Qi’an.

“She’s still in the Xiangcheng area, and she hasn’t encountered the Earth Sect’s demon daoists,” Xu Qi’an said, pointing to the south with a grave expression. “She went tomb raiding.”

Tomb raiding?!

This answer took the three of them by complete surprise, leaving them stunned for a long while.

From afar, Xu Qi’an spotted Qian You returning, his face filled with excitement as he scrambled back, laughing, “Perfect timing. Daoist, you can question him yourself.”

After a round of interrogation, Daoist Jinlian and the others had no more doubts and accepted the fact that Five had gone tomb raiding.

“Daoist, if Five is in the tomb, then why has the Earth Book fragment been blocked?” Chu Yuanzhen asked with a frown.

“Besides the Earth Sect’s secret techniques, other methods can block the Earth Book fragment, though they’re quite rare,” Daoist Jinlian said, narrowing his eyes as he gazed southward. “There must be a powerful formation in the tomb, which is why the Earth Book fragment is being blocked, preventing her from receiving our messages.”

So it’s like she’s out of signal range, Xu Qi’an thought. He then picked up on a detail—there was a large formation in the tomb, and everyone knew that Sitianjian specialised in formations.

“There’s no time to waste. Let’s head down immediately,” Daoist Jinlian urged, eager to move.

“No!”

Xu Qi’an shook his head. “I mentioned earlier that there’s also bad news.”

The three of them stared intently at him.

Meeting their gazes, Xu Qi’an’s expression grew serious. “Zhong Li used her prophecy ability to search for clues and is now suffering from the backlash of heavenly retribution.”

The three then turned their gaze to Zhong Li.

In the quiet atmosphere that followed, Daoist Jinlian spoke slowly, “Since we know Five’s whereabouts, there’s no need to rush. I believe we should take a brief rest and head into the tomb tomorrow.”

Master Hengyuan put his palms together. “This humble monk agrees.”

Chu Yuanzhen nodded. “Indeed, a wise choice.”

Everyone’s survival instincts are so strong. They’re all such reassuring companions, free of troublemakers or drama seekers—how wonderful, Xu Qi’an thought with relief.

Then he paused, suddenly realising that this sounded oddly familiar, like something he had just said not too long ago.

Chapter 305. In The Tomb

Zhong Li was now suffering the effects of heavenly retribution, so it was out of the question to leave her outside. Xu Qi’an was always a man with compassion for beauty.

But bringing her into the tomb could carry the risk of a TPK. Therefore, Daoist Jinlian’s decision was the safest option, and everyone unanimously agreed.

That night, mishaps were frequent.

As Zhong Li meditated cross-legged, a large wild boar suddenly burst out of the grass next to her, giving her a brutal charge. Birds flying overhead dropped a load of golden fertilizer right as they passed over her head.

A large tree was suddenly blown over by the wind, crashing down on her head with a loud thud; a stray arrow from a hunter on the mountain at night nearly killed her...

It was tragic, truly tragic. The men who witnessed Zhong Li’s ordeal fell silent.

The men were mute, the women in tears.

Finally, they saw the light of dawn. Zhong Li compiled a list of items to ward off yin energy, and sent Qian You to buy them in the city.

“I... I’ll take a little nap...” Zhong Li reached out her small hand and tugged on Xu Qi’an’s sleeve, “Don’t leave me.”

When Qian You returned with the supplies, Zhong Li was still sleeping. Xu Qi’an lifted her onto his back, following Daoist Jinlian and the others toward the mountains in the south.

“Mnn...” Zhong Li mumbled in her sleep.

“Keep sleeping. I’ll wake you when we reach the tomb entrance,” Xu Qi’an whispered.

Comforted, Zhong Li continued sleeping soundly.

After the time it takes for two sticks of incense to burn, Qian You led the group to a mountain hollow, where he expertly found the entrance to the tomb, hidden by a cover of branches.

Qian You cleared away the branches, revealing a narrow passage just wide enough for one person.

“Let’s head in,” Daoist Jinlian said.

“Alright.”

Chu Yuanzhen and Hengyuan nodded, then turned to look at Xu Qi'an along with Daoist Jinlian.

“Give me one good reason!” Xu Qi'an said seriously.

“A Refining Spirit martial artist's spirit sense can detect danger in advance,” Daoist Jinlian replied with a smile.

“The indestructible Vajra body's protection is unmatched,” Chu Yuanzhen added.

“...Fine, you've convinced me.” Xu Qi'an bent over and entered the passage with Zhong Li on his back.

The four followed behind, keeping a relatively safe distance.

The passage started narrow, just big enough to pass through, but after several dozen steps, it suddenly opened up.

Exiting the tunnel, Xu Qi'an stepped onto some bricks, probably from the wall when tomb robbers had dug their way in.

Clack, clack...

He dug out his flint and steel, and lit the torch he had prepared earlier. Flames flickered.

This tomb has been opened for nearly three months, allowing air to exchange with the outside, the oxidation within the tomb is very high... this won't do, it'll destroy all the archaeological artefacts in the tomb — there's things that will break down as soon as they touch oxygen... heh, as if I really need to pass an audit, thinking such nonsense excuses... Xu Qi'an scoffed internally.

Footsteps sounded behind him as Daoist Jinlian and the others emerged into the tomb, igniting their own torches to light up the darkness.

Xu Qi'an bent down and picked up a brick, squeezing it to find that its hardness was far greater than he expected.

“What kind of brick is this?” he asked.

Daoist Jinlian moved his torch closer, studying it carefully for a few moments. “Qinggang brick.”

“?”

Xu Qi'an looked at him, puzzled.

“It's a rare type of stone, known for its durability and resistance to weathering,” Chu Yuanzhen explained. “I've read about it in books, but this is my first time seeing it in person.”

Xu Qi'an nodded. “This is probably just the edge of the main tomb. Judging by these bricks, the entire tomb may be constructed from Qinggang stone bricks.

“The tomb's owner must be even more distinguished than we expected.”

No wonder he's a genius at solving cases — sharp thinking, exceptional analytical skills, Chu Yuanzhen thought.

The group searched the chamber and discovered twelve coffins, along with four corpses that had been there for a few days, giving off a faint odour of decay.

“Three of them are from the gang, and the fourth was a hired expert,” Qian You murmured.

Though he was used to high risks and frequent crises in this line of work, he still felt a heavy weight in his heart.

Xu Qi'an set Zhong Li down, handed her a torch, and squatted to inspect the bodies. “Faces ashen, lips black, they died to poison.”

“There's no poisonous gas in the air,” Zhong Li observed.

Xu Qi'an nodded and quickly stripped the clothes off the deceased, revealing several small puncture marks on one of the arms, as if bitten by some kind of insect.

“They're in the coffins. These men must have disturbed the coffins,” Chu Yuanzhen suddenly said.

Xu Qi'an's ears twitched, picking up faint, dense wriggling sounds coming from inside the stone coffins.

It seemed the stone coffins were breeding grounds for venomous insects.

“Shall we open the coffins?” Hengyuan asked, looking at Daoist Jinlian.

Daoist Jinlian, in turn, looked at Chu Yuanzhen.

Chu Yuanzhen nodded, flicking a finger to release a burst of sword energy that struck the stone coffin, stopping the wriggling noise inside.

With a wave of his sleeve, he opened the coffin lid, and a nauseating stench flooded the air.

All present were experts, impervious to such toxins. Zhong Li opened her hand, revealing a brown pill and said to Qian You, “This is an anti-poison pill.”

“Thank you, Miss,” Qian You said gratefully, swallowing it.

The four members of the Heaven and Earth Society stood around the stone coffin, examining the interior. Countless jointed poisonous insects had been smashed to a pulp, black and brown fluid splattering the coffin walls.

In addition to the bugs crushed by Chu Yuanzhen's force, there was a severely deformed skeleton inside, its age indeterminate, though clearly ancient.

It's a shame there's no technology in this world to date this skeleton, Xu Qi'an thought.

“There are no burial goods, so these coffins should be the ones belonging to the attendants buried with the tomb owner,” Chu Yuanzhen said.

“The Great Feng doesn’t have a practice of burying the living with the dead, right?” Xu Qi’an asked, curious.

“The custom of burying the living has been around since ancient times, though the exact origins are unclear. The practice of burial sacrifices was officially abolished 2,123 years ago in the Great Yi Dynasty, before the Confucian sage was born.”

Without hesitation, Chu Yuanzhen recalled the relevant knowledge and answered without missing a beat.

“That means this tomb is over two thousand years old,” said Daoist Jinlian.

After searching around fruitlessly, they left the chamber with their torches and ventured further inside. Along the way, they occasionally encountered corpses, each fallen to some trap.

After a while, they entered a larger chamber. The ceiling was cloaked in shadow above, and darkness stretched endlessly before them.

Xu Qi’an swung his torch, revealing bodies strewn across the ground. Some were recent, their flesh still intact; others were skeletal and dressed in ragged, unidentifiable clothing. None of the skeletal remains were whole—heads torn off, limbs severed, bodies hacked to pieces.

Here and there lay opened coffins.

Clearly, a fierce battle had taken place. Grave robbers had disturbed the coffins, awakening the dormant corpses.

“What’s with these zombies? Isn’t corpse manipulation the purview of the Church of the Warlock God?”

Xu Qi’an the “culturally ignorant” was the first to speak, casting his gaze toward unopened coffins in the distance.

Zhong Li shook her head. “These zombies have nothing to do with the Church of the Warlock God; they have merely been nourished by yin energy over time and transformed into undead. Fortunately, they’re already destroyed, saving us a lot of trouble.”

As soon as she finished, a series of loud “bangs” echoed through the chamber—the sound of coffin lids being pushed aside and crashing to the ground.

In the darkness, silhouettes rose, emaciated figures with sharp, blackened nails and eerie, emerald-green eyes glinting malevolently.

“Amitabha Buddha!”

Hengyuan chanted a Buddhist prayer and strode forward, dispatching a zombie with a single, explosive punch to the head.

After eliminating the zombies, they discovered murals on the walls on either side of the chamber.

On the left wall, the mural depicted people in ancient attire, bowing and prostrating before a high platform.

The mural on the right was far less conventional, showing countless pairs of men and women engaging in acts of intimacy. They maintained fixed postures, indulging in passion. Some of the positions were unfamiliar even to Xu Qi'an, despite his extensive tutelage from his hard-drive wives.

The bodies in the mural were outlined with meridian flow diagrams.

“This appears to be an ancient sexual cultivation technique,” said Daoist Jinlian solemnly.

“An ancient sexual cultivation technique?”^[1]

Chu Yuanzhen had some understanding but not in depth, while Hengyuan and Xu Qi'an were both in the dark.

After a moment of thought, Daoist Jinlian explained, “The Daoist Venerable is revered as the origin of all magicks, possessing vast knowledge. The orthodox Daoist schools divide his teachings into the three Sects of Heaven, Earth, and Man, yet many lesser branches also emerged.

“One of these branches practiced dual-cultivation, blending yin and yang to pursue the great Dao together. At its height, this sect rivalled the three orthodox schools, attracting endless worshippers, including noble officials who longed for the path to immortality. Some noblewomen even lingered at Daoist temples, willingly offering themselves for dual cultivation. According to the Earth Sect's records, even some women of high status were among them.”

Wow, this sect really knew how to party... No, no, that's my mind going astray. For them, seeking the Dao was the main goal, with everything else mere distractions... Xu Qi'an was shocked, examining the murals intently, trying to memorize both the postures and the flow of meridians.

Hengyuan shook his head, his gaze clear as he looked at the murals, unmoved and unshaken in his Buddhist resolve.

“This technique could certainly aid cultivation, though finding a partner skilled in it would be difficult,” commented the Zhuangyuan.

Dual cultivation required a partner adept in the art—it was not as simple as picking someone at a brothel.

“Heaven and Earth, Yin and Yang, transforming into the Five Elements... Dual cultivation was originally an orthodox path to the Dao. However, while technique is emotionless, people are not. The progress in dual cultivation was slow and required practitioners to remain firm and not be swayed by desire.

“Eventually, some among them, eager for quick results, created the art of 'essence absorption,' leading them into the demonic path. They deceived female followers, imprisoning them in the temple for absorption, and kidnapped women everywhere, inciting widespread anger.

“Finally, they provoked the imperial army and outraged Jianghu heroes... and were thus eradicated. Today, fragments of dual-cultivation techniques still exist within Daoism, though as incomplete pieces, they have little practical use. To think, this place holds a complete version of the dual-cultivation technique.”

Daoist Jinlian sighed.

“Why would a complete dual-cultivation technique be here, though?” asked Xu Qi'an.

Chapter 306. Labyrinths and Reunions

“Wasn't this sect supposedly once very popular among nobility? The owner of this tomb clearly held a high status,” Chu Yuanzhen analyzed.

The implication was clear: the tomb owner was a devoted follower of the dual-cultivation technique.

“To come across a complete version of the lost dual-cultivation technique makes this trip worthwhile,” Daoist Jinlian sighed.

“But you don't engage in relations with women, Daoist. This technique is useless to you,” Xu Qi'an smiled.

Daoist Jinlian's face darkened.

“The clothing of those people in the mural is rather strange,” Chu Yuanzhen added, his interest more piqued by the other mural than the technique itself. “It's so ancient that I can't even determine the dynasty.”

Having already memorized the technique depicted in the murals, Xu Qi'an quickly urged, “Let's go and find Number Five. That's the priority.”

This was too valuable a find to share.

The group continued deeper into the tomb, with Qian You listening intently to their discussion, aware that the mural contained the legendary dual-cultivation technique.

Such a treasure! Both bedroom activities and cultivation combined, neither disrupting the other.

For many men, this was a practically irresistible temptation. Especially for someone like Qian You, a man of the Jianghu, who lacked resources, lacked renowned mentors, and lacked secret texts.

He dropped back a few steps, waiting for the others to move on, then swiftly turned back to the mural.

I'll memorize it and then catch up. It won't take long... it won't take long...

Holding his torch tightly, he walked briskly. Only his footsteps echoed through the empty, silent tomb.

Gradually, Qian You realized something was wrong. He had been walking for a long time but hadn't yet reached the mural.

We didn't walk this far. Why haven't I reached the mural?

He swept his torch around, illuminating the empty, silent tomb. There was no mural, no coffins... nothing.

After a moment of shock, a cold sweat poured down his back.

He stammered, his teeth chattering in fear. “H-Heroes? I’m right here! Don’t leave me behind...”

The sound echoed, distorting in the open chamber, coming back to him as if others were calling out.

Fear tightened around him like a vice, his skin prickling with dread. Clamping his mouth shut, he dared not make another sound.

He turned and walked quickly, hoping to catch up with Xu Qi'an and the others. His brisk steps turned to frantic running, his breath labored, but he never reached them.

All alone in the silent tomb, his own footsteps echoed back at him. It was chilling, as if the tomb itself was drawing him into its icy depths.

Suddenly, he tripped and crashed hard to the ground. Grimacing, he held his torch close, inspecting the ground.

It was a corpse — half a corpse, to be precise.

The body had been severed at the waist, the lower half missing. Its entrails had been emptied, leaving the wound a mangled mess of flesh and bone.

Qian You screamed, scrambling backward in terror.

There’s a monster, a monster that eats human flesh ... just nearby, I could meet it at any moment... Panic erupted through him, draining the colour from his face.

Leave, I must leave this place immediately.

Qian You’s hand shook as he clutched his torch, taking a deep breath to steady himself.

As a veteran in the Houtu Gang, he’d ventured into many tombs and survived various dangers, but none like this. His courage held firm, but only just.

A torch might attract it, but without light, I’d be blind to any danger. Besides, anything that’s lived underground this long would have poor eyesight, sensitive to light.

I don’t need to extinguish the torchlight, but rather eliminate my scent.

From his pack, he retrieved a porcelain jar containing a pungent powder, faintly reminiscent of corpse stench.

Dousing himself in the powder, he raised his torch and began cautiously moving forward. His sense of direction was gone; he could only walk aimlessly.

Suddenly, he heard a delighted voice from behind him. “Qian You?”

...

The others continued for a while until Daoist Jinlian suddenly furrowed his brow. “Are we missing someone?”

Turning around, he scanned the empty space behind them, and his eyes narrowed.

The Houtu Gang's chief was nowhere to be seen.

Xu Qi'an, Chu Yuanzhen, and Hengyuan quickly noticed the same, their expressions shifting to alarm.

"When did he disappear? I didn't notice anything at all." Xu Qi'an closed his eyes, concentrating on his perception, then frowned.

"My spiritual sense hasn't been hindered. If something had taken him, I would have sensed its hostility toward us too. The moment it bore any hostility, my senses would have picked it up."

Chu Yuanzhen's expression grew grim. "Not only that—the sound of his footsteps vanished without any of us noticing. That in itself is unusual."

Hengyuan frowned, remaining silent.

Daoist Jinlian's expression changed. He retrieved his Earth Book fragment, studying it for a moment before saying in a low voice, "The Earth Book fragment isn't working."

Xu Qi'an, Chu Yuanzhen, and Hengyuan each instinctively reached into their robes. Though the latter two pulled out their fragments, Xu Qi'an quickly stopped himself and instead scratched his chest absent-mindedly...

"It really isn't working," Chu Yuanzhen confirmed, his face darkening after a failed attempt to send a message.

So that's why Number Five had gone missing near Xiangcheng.

This tomb was blocking their connection to the Earth Book fragments.

"Um, I think I know where we are—or rather, I know what our situation is," Zhong Li raised her hand timidly.

The four turned to her, and she lowered her head, speaking softly.

"In general, a tomb is divided into outer, middle, and inner layers. The innermost chamber houses the main tomb, where the master of the rests. The middle layer is for side chambers and corridors, where the master's important companions are buried. The outer layer is the tomb's defense. We're currently in the outermost layer, which is also the most dangerous.

"This place is filled with mechanisms, traps, and formations... if I'm not mistaken, we've been in a formation since entering the chamber with the murals."

The four men looked at her simultaneously, and Xu Qi'an stared, "Why didn't you say so sooner?"

"I forgot," Zhong Li lowered her head, aggrieved. "I don't know why, I just forgot."

Hearing this, the men all fell silent, unwilling to scold her any further.

"Do you know what kind of formation this is?" Daoist Jinlian asked.

"It should be a type of Bewildering Formation. The layout of the outer structure of the underground palace aligns with this kind of formation. We're inside a vast labyrinth, and we must find the correct path to escape. Otherwise, we'll be trapped here indefinitely," Zhong Li said.

"Lead us out, quickly," urged Chu Yuanzhen.

"I-I'll probably lead you into a dead end," Zhong Li muttered, lowering her head even further.

The group: "..."

Poor poor Master of Prophecy... Xu Qi'an sighed inwardly.

Chu Yuanzhen, frowning, glanced at Xu Qi'an and found inspiration: "If we can't break the formation conventionally, a brute-force approach might be best, like Xu Qi'an's two strikes during the duel."

Daoist Jinlian dismissed the suggestion, his expression solemn. "Until we understand who the tomb owner is, it's best not to act rashly. The outer structure is built entirely of Qinggang stone—a luxury even the current Emperor Yuanjing couldn't afford.

"Moreover, the tomb contains the ancient art of dual cultivation, the most secret method of that sect. Typically, such a technique wouldn't be given up so easily, yet it's here.

"This Bewildering Formation is incredibly intricate, and it was set up at least two millennia ago, a time before arcanists. All these factors point to the tomb owner being anything but ordinary. Breaking the formation recklessly could lead to unpredictable consequences. Heh, if you were a third rank master, then forget I said anything."

Chu Yuanzhen nodded silently.

Hengyuan furrowed his brows and asked, "So, what should we do now?"

Being a warrior monk, he didn't understand such matters. Chu Yuanzhen, though well-read as a scholar, pursued the path of the sword and had limited knowledge of formations.

Xu Ningyan was a mere martial artist; he was even less dependable.

"The Daoist sect isn't specialized in feng-shui, but we have some knowledge of formations. I could attempt to guide us through," said Daoist Jinlian.

The Daoist sects do know about formations; after all, when Zilian was battling Yang Yan outside the capital, he used a large formation he had set up to aid him. However, they weren't as adept as arcanists, who could conjure formations with just a step.

After a quarter of an hour, Daoist Jinlian's face grew tense as he gazed into the deep darkness ahead, silent and contemplative.

The Daoist had failed to find a path and was questioning his self-worth.

Even the Daoist is a fraud... Xu Qi'an thought bitterly.

No one present knew that Daoist Jinlian was a remnant soul of the Daoist Earth Sect's leader, the virtuous aspect of his personality. They couldn't perceive the heavy truth hidden behind his solemn demeanour.

They were in deep trouble—very deep.

"Before arcanists, who else had such powerful expertise in formations?" Daoist Jinlian pondered, searching his mind for any likely suspects.

"Is there really no solution, Daoist?"

Hengyuan and Chu Yuanzhen exchanged glances, each seeing the gravity in the other's eyes.

How reckless of us! We should have consulted the local chronicles in Xiangcheng or studied historical records to glean clues about this tomb before coming in... Our team's strength could make even a fourth rank expert flee in terror. I let this overconfidence slip past me, Chu Yuanzhen silently regretted.

Hengyuan softly recited a Buddhist mantra, feeling guilty. Number Five had been missing for days, waiting for rescue in this dark, eerie tomb, yet here they were, stymied so soon.

Daoist Jinlian sighed, looking at Zhong Li. "Do you have any suggestions? You don't need to make a choice—just elaborate on the intricacies of this formation."

Zhong Li thought for a moment, "This type of formation is usually established in enclosed spaces or underground, or else an entrant could easily orient themselves and discern the correct path.

"Without the ability to orient oneself, the only way out is to rely on the enterer's experience and judgment. If... if my experience and judgment become muddled, it may lead to even greater trouble."

Now, Daoist Jinlian also fell silent.

The members of the Heaven and Earth Society finally felt Number Five's despair: trapped underground, unable to leave, with no connection to the outside world, time slipping away bit by bit, their physical conditions gradually deteriorating...

In the heavy silence, Zhong Li raised her hand slightly and softly said, "Actually, there is a reliable method."

Chu Yuanzhen and Xu Qi'an's faces lit up, and they asked urgently, "What method?"

Hengyuan looked at her, his eyes filled with hope.

Daoist Jinlian's heart skipped a beat.

Zhong Li poked Xu Qi'an with her finger and murmured, "If we let him lead, we can get out — most likely, anyway."

Him?!

Everyone's gaze shifted from Zhong Li to Xu Qi'an.

Chu Yuanzhen was somewhat sceptical as he scrutinised Xu Qi'an. Thoughts raced through his mind—Xu Ningyan was just a martial artist, with no knowledge of formations. Relying on him to break a formation was less promising than trying himself.

However, the Master of Prophecy wasn't one to joke lightly. So, was there something special about Xu Ningyan himself, or did he carry some item capable of dispelling formations?

Yet judging by Xu Ningyan's expression, he seemed equally baffled...

At this thought, Chu Yuanzhen glanced at Daoist Jinlian and noticed a look of realisation on his face.

Daoist Jinlian knows too? Chu Yuanzhen took note of this detail.

There seemed to be some mystery about Xu Ningyan... I'm getting more and more curious about him.

"Sir Xu, are you familiar with formations?"

Hengyuan, with fewer fanciful thoughts than the zhuangyuan scholar, voiced his confusion directly. Xu Qi'an's mouth twitched slightly. "No."

...

Qian You whirled around, instinctively drawing his weapon and assuming a guarded stance. Squinting into the shadows ahead, he called out in a low voice, "Who's there?"

Footsteps approached, and a figure came into view at the edge of the torchlight. A middle-aged man in his forties, his face gaunt and hollow-cheeked, bloodshot eyes deeply set in their sockets, gave him the look of someone who had just weathered a long illness.

Unkempt stubble covered his jawline, casting a shadow that made him appear both disheveled and weary.

"Boss?" Qian You's eyes widened in wild delight. He raised the torch, illuminating several familiar faces—brothers from the Houtu Gang.

I can't believe that I've found the boss, how fortunate is this... Just as Qian You was about to rush forward, his expression shifted, and he levelled his weapon at the group, bellowing nervously, "Stay back! Don't move, any of you, or my blade might not recognise friends. Now, how can you prove it's really you?"

The haggard leader gave an approving smile. "Good. No signs of carelessness. Looks like that human skin-wearing ghoul we encountered two years ago under the ground in Jingzhou left a lasting impression."

The other gang members with him cursed, "Qian, don't you know why we left you topside? With your lousy skills, coming down here would be a death sentence."

"Ha! It really is you all." Instead of getting mad, Qian You laughed and approached them eagerly. As he neared the sickly-looking gang leader, he suddenly scattered a handful of vermilion powder.

"Fucker, this stuff's only good against low-level spirits. It's useless against zombies." The gang leader cursed as he brushed off the powder.

Finally reassured, Qian You held the torch up, inspecting the group one by one. He saw the gang's second-in-command—an old arcanist with salt-and-pepper hair, whose white robes were now filthy and torn. He looked haggard, with deep sunken eyes.

Next, he noticed the young girl from the Southern Marches, her face much thinner than he remembered, with a sharp chin replacing her once-round cheeks. Though still pretty, her eyes were bloodshot, and she looked exhausted, struggling to conceal her fatigue.

After counting everyone, Qian You's mood grew heavy. Of the thirty-two men who had entered the tomb, only twelve remained.

"You must all be starving. I brought some provisions," he said, unpacking the food and water from his baggage and distributing them among the group.

Even the girl from the Southern Marches, along with the others, brightened at the sight of the provisions, staring at the food like it was a beautiful woman in the nude.

Their food supplies had been exhausted days ago, and they'd endured hunger in the tomb's depths ever since.

As he handed out the rations, Qian You noticed that each of his brothers bore injuries, some missing an arm, with sleeves torn off and wounds hastily bandaged, blood faintly seeping through.

"Boss, what happened to you?" he asked.

The men, who had been eating ravenously, froze at his words. The haggard leader spoke quietly, "We've run into some trouble."

Well, that much was obvious, Qian You thought.

"This place is a maze; no matter how we go, we can't find the way out," the leader explained. "After we entered the tomb, we stumbled into a chamber full of zombies. We lost several brothers fighting them off. Without Lina's help, more of us would have died."

The sickly leader cast a glance at the girl, who was munching on a flatbread, then continued, "After entering that chamber, we've been wandering without escape, going in circles for days as our food and water dwindled.

"The worst part came when, one day, we woke up to find that the 'night watch' had disappeared."

The men's faces fell, and the leader went on, "Since then, two of us have vanished each day. The group has been in a constant state of panic, and tensions with the hired experts boiled over. After a fierce argument, we split up."

"Not long after, we found that everyone who left had been killed—mauled as if something had feasted on them."

Qian You felt a chill run down his spine, thinking back to the corpse he'd nearly tripped over, too mangled to look at.

The sickly leader took a swig of water, swallowing his food before continuing. "It's some kind of monster, and a powerful one at that. Every day it hunts us, eating exactly two people—no more, no less."

His voice quivered slightly as he spoke.

“We’ve fought it off twice now, thanks to Lina. If it weren’t for her, you wouldn’t be seeing us.” The sickly leader’s tone grew solemn. “But Lina’s state is deteriorating, and without food or water, our strength will soon be spent. By the way, why’d you come down here?”

Chapter 307X. Strangeness

Upon hearing the question, Qian You immediately perked up. He cleared his throat a few times to gather the attention of the gang members and announced, “Boss, everyone—I’ve brought reinforcements for us. Don’t worry; we’ll be out of here soon.”

At his words, the gang was overjoyed. They asked eagerly, “Is it the Gongsun family from Xiangzhou’s martial world? Or is it Longshen Castle of Blackwater river?”

“If it’s either of them, we’re saved.”

“Right, the Gongsun family head is a fifth rank, with countless experts in his ranks and no shortage of skilled masters in the arcane arts. Longshen Castle is even stronger. But the two of them are known to be greedy; we’d likely have no share of any treasures from the tomb and would have to pay them a fortune.”

“Are you out of your mind? We’re facing death here—what good is money if we don’t survive? If they can save us, we’ll find a way to settle the costs later.”

The gang boss let out a sigh of relief and nodded approvingly. “Qian You, you did well.”

Qian You stayed silent for a long time, then replied with a peculiar expression, “My…my reinforcements aren’t from the Gongsun family or Longshen Castle.”

“What?”

The group’s enthusiasm dimmed instantly, their excitement vanishing. In the martial society of around Xiangcheng, the Gongsun family and Longshen Castle were unquestionably the leaders. Both held close ties with the Xiangcheng authorities, and many skilled martial artists in the area relied on them.

If anyone in Xiangcheng could rescue them, it would surely be one of these two powers.

The hopeful gleam in the gang boss’s eyes dulled.

The second-in-command, dressed in white robes, asked, “If it’s neither Longshen Castle nor the Gongsun family, then who did you find? What level are they? Do they have any affiliation or are they just a rogue practitioner?”

The second-in-command, Gongyang Su, was an Arcanist. It was well-known that aside from the Sitianjian, wandering Arcanists were as rare as phoenix feathers in the Jianghu.

With his mastery of Qi-watching and feng-shui, Gongyang Su was practically a natural-born tomb raider. As such, he was considered a treasure of the Houtu Gang, and though he held the title of deputy leader, the entire gang respected his words.

Once Gongyang Su spoke up, the gang fell silent, all looking toward Qian You.

"It's quite the coincidence, actually. I happened to run into these reinforcements by the roadside, but it seems they were looking for someone themselves..." Branch Leader Qian You looked over at the young girl from the Southern Marches, letting out a sigh as he said, "Miss Lina, they were looking for you."

The others all turned to the Southern Marches girl. Lina, who had been struggling with her flatbread, looked up, crumbs on her lips, clearly puzzled.

"This is my first time in the Great Feng. None of my clansmen came with me," Lina shook her head, indicating that she was alone and without friends.

Qian You explained, "One of the people I met was a Sixth Rank expert at the Bronze Skin and Iron Bones stage. He was exceptionally handsome and carried a woman with disheveled hair on his back..."

Before he could finish, Lina quickly shook her head. "I don't know him."

"But they were indeed looking for you. They even asked me if anyone in the tomb-raiding party was a girl from the Southern Marches. I figured that recently in Xiangcheng, you were the only one."

The gang boss furrowed his brow. He didn't believe Lina would have any reason to lie or evade here, especially as they were all in dire straits, needing mutual aid more than ever. Besides, if she really had a Sixth Rank friend in the Great Feng, would she have been starving for three days and three nights? If he hadn't offered her a meal, she was almost ready to resort to robbery.

Musing over this, the gang boss pondered, "Didn't you say there were several of them? Describe the others."

Qian You nodded. "Aside from that man and woman, there was a burly, fierce-looking monk, and a swordsman in azure robes who could fly with his sword. It was like seeing an immortal's techniques."

"Flying with his sword?" the gang boss exclaimed, having never heard of a martial artist able to fly by sword.

"Do you know who he might be?" Gongyang Su asked, looking at Lina.

The young Southern girl shook her head. "I don't."

Really, she didn't know them? How could that be? Those heroes and their companions were clearly here to find Miss Lina... Qian You, feeling puzzled, continued, "There was also a Daoist priest. I heard the others calling him Daoist Jinlian."

"Daoist Jinlian?!"

Lina suddenly shrieked in delight, her eyes lighting up as she repeatedly said, "I know him! I know him! Daoist Jinlian is a senior I trust deeply... Oh, he came looking for me! Daoist Jinlian really is a kind soul!"

So she does know them... the others were relieved.

It seemed that Daoist Jinlian was the one who knew Lina personally, with the others simply accompanying him as aid.

The burly bald-headed man is likely the monk Hengyuan, or Number Six... and the azure-robed swordsman has to be Number Four, currently in the capital due to the approaching Conflict of Heaven and Man... But who is the handsome Sixth Rank martial artist? Do we have anyone like that in the Heaven and Earth Society? Lina's not-so-bright mind worked hard, trying to match Qian You's "friends" with familiar faces, but she couldn't place the "man and woman" he mentioned.

"Miss Lina," one of the gang members asked, his face alight, his eyes fixed on her, "How strong are your friends?"

Lina, simple and straightforward, answered each question without hesitation. "Daoist Jinlian is a master of the Earth Sect. I'm not sure exactly which Rank, but he's much, much stronger than me."

The group's imaginations filled with scenes of her tearing zombies apart and battling the corpse-devouring monster, and since this Daoist was even stronger, they felt hope spring anew.

"The bald monk is a warrior monk of the Buddhist order; he's also quite powerful."

Lina didn't know much about Hengyuan and skipped over him, then continued, "As for the swordsman in azure robes, his name is Chu Yuanzhen. He's a main contender in the Conflict of Heaven and Man, representing the Human Sect in his duel against the holy maiden of the Heaven Sect."

"What?!"

The group cried out in shock, and the gang boss looked utterly stunned.

Xiangzhou was only a three-to-four-day horseback ride from the capital, and the upcoming Conflict of Heaven and Man had already made headlines across the capital and surrounding provinces. In Xiangcheng alone, many Jianghu folk were heading to the capital just to witness the event, even if it was merely a duel to the death between younger disciples of the Human and Heaven Sects.

Now, hearing out of the blue that one of the protagonists in the "Conflict of Heaven and Man" had come down into the tomb to save them...

The Houtu gang members felt much like farmers hearing that the Emperor had come to help them plant rice.

It felt so surreal, making them doubt its authenticity. But this came from Lina herself. They knew her well enough—a sweet, sincere girl, open-hearted and earnest, who wouldn't lie.

Yet, that didn't make her a fool. The Houtu gang had once seen a member from another group attempt to assault her during the night, and that guy's head had been crushed like a watermelon with a single slap.

Daring to trek thousands of miles from the Southern Marches to the capital—there's no way she could have made it this far without skills of her own.

"A master of the Earth Sect, a Buddhist warrior monk, a disciple of the Human Sect in the Conflict of Heaven and Man..." A member of the Houtu Gang swallowed hard, eyes filled with excitement.

“Th-then what about that man and woman? Who are they? They must be legendary figures to accompany such people, right, Miss Lina?”

All eyes turned toward her expectantly, hoping for a famous name to fall from her lips.

Lina tilted her head, thought for a moment, then replied, “I don’t know them.”

How... how disappointing... the crowd thought to themselves.

Coughing lightly, Qian You then asked, “Boss, you mentioned earlier that some creature has been hunting you. What sort of monster is it?”

“It looks like a gigantic lizard with a human face and sharp fangs. It moves quickly but makes no sound,” replied the sickly-looking Boss, a hint of fear flickering in his eyes. “It craves internal organs. Any poor soul it kills is left with their limbs intact, but their insides are completely hollowed out.”

That’s strange, thought Qian You, recalling the corpse he’d seen, whose lower half had been bitten clean off. Frowning, he continued, “And its size?”

“It’s about seven feet long—not very big.”

Suddenly, Lina’s ears twitched. In the still darkness, she picked up on a strange sound. She immediately stood up and warned, “Be careful. It’s here again.”

As her words echoed, a shadow sprang from the darkness, its tongue flicking out to snatch the nearest Houtu Gang member.

Bang!

With a roar, Lina launched herself like a cannonball, crashing into the creature.

As the shadowy beast was knocked back, it whipped its tail at Lina’s back with a sharp crack, tearing her clothing and exposing tender skin dotted with fine beads of blood.

The creature slinked off into the darkness, as if it had vanished entirely. Lina, however, remained vigilant, keenly listening for any signs of its return.

“Stay alert,” she warned. “This vile thing is sly and only dares to attack when it thinks it has the advantage.”

The Boss drew his weapon and, along with the others, held his stance, eyes scanning the shadows.

In the past few days, one by one, members of the Houtu Gang had fallen to this creature, leading the survivors to grasp its brutal habits.

The monster was unwilling to face Lina directly and would wait in the darkness for an opportunity to strike, retreating immediately after each successful attack.

Lina edged backward, snatching the torch from Qian You’s hands. Her cute, delicate face had turned serious. She listened for a moment, then flung the torch into the distance.

In the flickering light, they saw the creature—a gigantic lizard clinging to the wall, its dull grayish-brown eyes fixed to the sides of its head, unresponsive to the firelight.

Qian You finally saw it clearly: the beast was under ten feet long, its tail as long as its body, and its skin covered in thick scales and jagged horns.

With a burst of energy from her meal, Lina showed her full strength, crouching in silence before springing forward so fast that the floor cracked a beat after she had disappeared.

The wall-clinging monster noticed the disturbance and vanished into the shadows.

Lina, with her extensive hunting experience in the Southern Marches, chased it down. One-on-one, she and the creature clashed in the tomb chamber, echoes of battle and shouts piercing the darkness.

Finally, silence fell.

“M- miss Lina?” called the Sickly Boss, forcing his voice to remain steady.

From the depths of the darkness came Lina’s groaning voice: “Owwww, that really hurts!”

A moment later, she emerged, dragging the creature’s lifeless body behind her.

Cheers erupted as the Houtu Gang members wept with joy, shouting in relief from days of tension.

Lina dumped the creature’s corpse before them, asking cheerfully, “Can we eat it?”

The men frantically shook their heads.

“Miss Lina,” warned the Arcanist Gongyang Su, “this creature grew in the tomb, feasting on poisons and rotting flesh, absorbing dark energy. It would be deadly for us.”

“Huff...huff...”

A sudden gust of wind blew through the corridor ahead, a gust with a putrid smell, extinguishing their torches.

The wind rose and fell rhythmically, like breathing.

No, it was breathing.

Gongyang Su’s face turned pale as he rasped, “Something’s coming. There’s yin energy up ahead.”

Just moments after surviving one crisis, everyone’s hearts sank once more.

“Light the torches,” ordered the sickly-looking Boss, his face grim as he turned to Lina. “Can you still fight?”

Qian You hurriedly struck a spark against the firestone, trying to light a torch with trembling hands, but the flame refused to catch.

The breathing grew closer, the stench thickening. And still, no footsteps.

“Come on, hurry, come on!”

Qian You was close to panicking as he struck the firestone again. A faint spark finally caught, setting the torch alight.

“Whoosh!”

Flames flared, piercing the darkness.

Grabbing the torch, Qian You hurled it forward.

The light revealed a massive shadow crouching in the corridor, poised in hunting stance.

This creature was three times the size of the previous one, of the same species, with dull gray-brown eyes and protruding fangs.

Another one?!

The torch's light blazed only for a moment before fading, and the next thing the group knew, the creature had vanished.

The sickly Boss felt a sudden chill as something fast brushed past him, and then he realized—Lina was gone.

“Lina!”

The Boss shouted as he spun around. The others did the same.

In the darkness, the monster had grabbed the Southern girl, shaking its head viciously in a deadly thrash.

The Boss's eyes filled with rage as he bellowed, “Save her! Kill that beast!”

Lina's painful cries echoed through the darkness.

At that moment, a voice shouted from the other end of the corridor, “Stand back!”

A young man in azure robes rushed forward, raising a flaming torch. Holding his fingers to the torch, he drew a flame with his fingers, letting it flare to life before snapping it at the monster.

The flame shot through the darkness, drawing a streak of light, striking the creature's back.

Bang!

With an explosion, charred flesh filled the air.

Caught off guard, the creature released Lina and turned, snarling, to charge at the young man.

A figure stepped forward from behind the young man, meeting the monster head-on. A faint golden light spread from his brow across his entire body.

With a low growl, he charged, head down, smashing into the creature.

Duang!

The sinister creature slammed into him, like smashing into an iron post. Its head shuddered violently, and its forward momentum froze. Meanwhile, a radiant golden figure was thrown backward, embedding itself in the wall with a crash, like a piece of divine metal.

In that moment of pause, another figure sprang into the air. Seizing the creature's momentary dizziness, it leaped squarely onto its head.

Chanting “Amitabha” under his breath, he raised his fist, which was as large as a cooking pot.

Thud, thud, thud...

Amidst the rain of powerful punches, the creature struggled violently at first, then spasmed uncontrollably, and finally fell lifeless, its skull shattered.

Daoist Jinlian appeared last, holding a torch, and spoke soothingly, “Do not fear; we’re here to save you.”

Qian You shouted excitedly, “They’re friends of Miss Lina. I invited them as reinforcements!”

The members of the Houtu Gang stared at Daoist Jinlian, captivated by his calm demeanor and profound presence, which matched their image of a peerless master.

“Thank you, Daoist, for saving our lives,” they exclaimed gratefully.

With a slight nod, torch in hand, Daoist Jinlian surveyed the surroundings, spotting Lina lying in a pool of blood in the shadows.

He stepped forward to assess her. Half her body was mauled, the wounds were so deep that her organs were faintly visible. But thin silver threads wove swiftly through the flesh, sealing wounds and starting to repair her skin.

As long as one’s Life Gu was intact; a shaman would not die.

Daoist Jinlian exhaled in relief.

Nearby, Zhong Li grabbed onto Xu Qi’an’s foot, and leaning back at a forty-five degree angle, finally managed to yank him out.

Xu Qi’an deactivated his Vajra Body and called out loudly, “Daoist, how’s your friend doing?”

“She’s injured but in no danger.” Daoist Jinlian gestured to Zhong Li, saying, “Miss Zhong, do you have any healing pills?”

“Mhm,” Zhong Li mumbled, pulling a porcelain bottle from her rough robe and handing it to Daoist Jinlian. “One pill a day, fully healed in three days.”

Daoist Jinlian uncorked the bottle and sniffed. The pills were of extreme quality.

The Sitianjian is truly rich... the poor Daoist hasn’t had funds for alchemy in years... thought Daoist Jinlian enviously as he gently pried Lina’s mouth open and administered a pill.

Xu Qi’an, torch in hand, eagerly joined in, examining the fabled Number Five. Her hair was black with chestnut brown streaks, slightly curled at the tips. Her lithe figure resembled that of a fierce young panther.

Her features were delicate, with thin lips, a fine nose, and healthy sun-kissed skin—quite the wild beauty from the Southern Marches.

Not bad—her features are a bit more defined than Great Feng women... quite the pretty online friend! Xu Qi’an nodded in satisfaction.

Having confirmed that Number Five was fine, Xu Qi’an and the others used their torches to inspect the remains of the evil creature.

“What kind of monster is this?”

The uneducated Xu Qi’an could only think: *What. The fuck.*

“It should be a Tomb Guardian Beast,” explained the knowledgeable Chu Yuanzhen. “I’ve read records about such creatures. After death, the ancients would place strange beasts in their tombs to serve as guardians.

“At first, their numbers would be vast, and to survive, they’d devour each other or feed on corpses. They eventually dwindled.”

Daoist Jinlian added, “Over generations, nourished by yin energy and corrupted by the poisons of the tomb, they’ve become unrecognizable from their ancestors.”

“Is there any value in the corpse?” Xu Qi’an asked.

Daoist Jinlian shook his head.

“Zhong Li, take care of her. Carry her properly.” Xu Qi’an pragmatically averted his gaze from the corpse, saying, “Stay close to me, or I won’t be able to protect you.”

Too far, and my invisible wings won’t cover you!

Daoist Jinlian hesitated slightly at this arrangement. Given that Number Five was already injured, pairing her with the Sitianjian’s Master of Prophecy seemed unduly harsh.

With this kid’s luck, there shouldn’t... be any issues... surely... Daoist Jinlian thought, and then turned to the survivors from the Houtu Gang, offering them a few comforting words. Finally, he gestured to Xu Qi’an to lead the way.

The group, torches in hand, continued onward.

The sickly Boss watched these experts’ backs, recalling the battle just now. The swordsman in azure robes must be one of the protagonists in the “Conflict of Heaven and Man.”

That Buddhist monk was formidable indeed, killing the monster barehanded. Miss Lina hadn’t mentioned his identity in detail; I’d thought he was just an assistant, yet he turned out so powerful.

And the young sixth rank warrior seems... rather ordinary... the Boss mused.

In his mind, a sixth-rank warrior with Bronze Skin and Iron Bones should naturally be resilient, so Xu Qi’an’s performance hadn’t stood out to him.

As for the dishevelled woman, he couldn’t make sense of her since she hadn’t made a move.

While deep in thought, the Boss heard one of his subordinates exclaim, “We’ve made it out of the maze!”

At the end of the passageway lay an enormous burial chamber with a bronze coffin at its centre, along with a selection of burial goods—gold, silver, pottery, and books, et cetera.

Over the centuries, the silver had oxidized and wept like wax, while the gold remained relatively intact. The books and silks, however, would disintegrate at a touch.

So, this tomb isn’t entirely sealed from oxygen... Xu Qi’an observed and asked, “Is this the main burial chamber?”

“No, it’s an auxiliary chamber,” replied the Boss. “It should be one of the many chambers surrounding the main tomb.”

The Houtu Gang members eagerly collected the valuable gold and silver, ignoring the books and other items. This wasn’t because they were uncultured, only seeing the precious metals, it was quite the opposite; the Houtu Gang were professionals, after all.

They knew full well that in such ancient tombs, the books were too fragile to be removed.

Chu Yuanzhen, with a natural interest in books, casually flipped through a few. The pages were so delicate that they turned to ash with a light touch.

Nonetheless, he wasn’t entirely disappointed—he had at least determined who lay buried here.

“This tomb is no ordinary one; it’s the tomb of an emperor. His consort lies interred here,” Chu Yuanzhen stated.

“So, what’s the plan? Heading to the main tomb could be dangerous. If we turn back, though, we’ll re-enter the maze,” he said, glancing at Xu Qi’an. “I’d say the latter is the safer choice.”

Though curious about the tomb owner’s identity, safety came first. Xu Qi’an nodded in agreement with Chu Yuanzhen’s suggestion.

Aside from the unconscious Lina and the taciturn Zhong Li, the other members of the Earthly Society unanimously agreed that retracing their steps was the right call.

Thus, leading the Houtu Gang followers, they headed back into the maze.

...

After an indeterminate amount of time, Xu Qi’an led the group out of the corridor, arriving in another auxiliary chamber.

“Why are we back here?” The Boss frowned.

The members of the Earthly Society were silent.

“Let’s try again,” Xu Qi’an said, looking at Daoist Jinlian and the others.

“Alright...” Chu Yuanzhen nodded, his expression grim.

...

After another stretch of walking, Xu Qi’an once again led the group out of the corridor, back into an auxiliary chamber.

“We’re... back here again?” The Boss’s voice trembled.

The other Houtu Gang members grew visibly pale and terrified.

“Should... should we try again?” Xu Qi’an swallowed hard.

“... Alright,” Chu Yuanzhen replied, his voice strained.

...

The third time, they found themselves in the same auxiliary chamber once again.

The group fell into a deathly silence. Xu Qi'an stiffly turned his head to look at Zhong Li.

She shook her head.

Daoist Jinlian was silent for a long moment before he sighed deeply, saying, "We'll have to go in. If we don't, we may never find a way out of this tomb."

Xu Qi'an exchanged looks with Chu Yuanzhen and Hengyuan, gritted his teeth, and grunted: "Alright."

Then he turned to the Houtu Gang members, warning them, "Once we enter the main tomb, don't touch anything, don't speak carelessly. Understood?"

Though greedy by nature, the tomb raiders knew survival came first and nodded vigorously.

Just then, an elderly man in a filthy white robe looked at Zhong Li and said, "Whatever you do, don't use Qi-watching technique here."

This old man... Xu Qi'an studied him discreetly.

Zhong Li nodded meekly: "Mhm."

Chapter 308. You've Come

This old bloke is the wild Arcanist Qian You was talking about?

It seems that he's noticed that Zhong Li is also an Arcanist, he must know then that she's from the Sitianjian. After all, wild arcanists are as rare as giant pandas, two of them showing up around one city would be nigh on unthinkable.

Xu Qi'an mused.

"The owner of this tomb is no ordinary figure. Hehe, it's best not to see things you shouldn't. That's one of my hard-won lessons from years of tomb raiding. You Sitianjian Arcanists don't lower yourselves to such work and lack some experience yet." Gongyang Su chuckled.

A Sitianjian Arcanist?!

The members of the Houtu Gang looked at Zhong Li, astonished and surprised.

So, it turns out she was the real deal all along; she's actually an Arcanist from the Sitianjian... Often, these silent types are at the heart of things.

So it really is "the sage presents as a common man", she's actually an arcanist from the Sitianjian... as expected, these silent characters are often at the heart of the matter.

The sickly Boss thought.

Looking at Xu Qi'an, he became more convinced that this man held the lowest standing among them.

Firstly, as a martial artist, it was difficult to imagine him as a core member in such a group. Secondly, during the earlier fight with the evil creature, his role had simply been to act as a shield. It was a straightforward demonstration of his purpose.

“Mm-hmm.” Zhong Li nodded, signalling that she understood.

She would absolutely refrain from casting any spells and would certainly not participate in any combat. This was a principle distilled from a mature Master of Prophecy’s experience.

Chu Yuanzhen remained silent, his gaze occasionally assessing Xu Qi’an, then Daoist Jinlian.

Xu Ningyan is strange; he’s not as simple as he appears.

He’s come into this side chamber three times. There are only two possibilities: either he’s doing it intentionally, or there’s some special reason compelling him back to this spot.

What secret is Xu Ningyan hiding... Hiss, Number Three is connected to Cloud Deer Academy’s surge of noble energy, and he’s a Confucian disciple. But his cousin also has another secret... Daoist, your collecting skills are very good.

...

The group, their spirits weighed down, entered the side chamber, which led to a passage stretching into the depths.

“Uh, so... Daoist, why don’t you take the lead? I’m just a child.” Xu Qi’an stood at the mouth of the passage, looking into the darkness, hesitating a bit.

“Are you sensing danger?” Daoist Jinlian asked, alert.

*Not really; I just feel a bit spooked, dredging up memories of horror movies from my childhood...

* Xu Qi’an replied inwardly, taking a deep breath and raising his torch as he stepped into the passage.

The passage was narrow, its stone walls bearing signs of human carving, tinged with the orange glow of the torchlight.

Their footsteps echoed in the silence, emphasizing the tension within everyone’s hearts.

At the passage’s end was a tall stone door, closed and untouched.

Xu Qi’an stopped before it, pressing both hands against the door. He applied force but didn’t push hard, remaining still for a few seconds, sensing no premonition of danger.

He withdrew his hands and nodded at Daoist Jinlian. “No danger. Well, at least I don’t sense any.”

“Open it,” Daoist Jinlian instructed.

Crrrk!

With a rough, heavy sound, the stone door gradually swung inward.

The torch’s light reached inside, illuminating only a few metres before being swallowed by the darkness.

Xu Qi’an noticed the torch flicker and said quickly, “Wait a moment; there’s no air in here.”

Then he turned to Zhong Li, instructing, “Do you have any anti-poison pills? Hand some out to the Houtu Gang brothers.”

The white-robed, dirt-streaked Gongyang Su replied, “No need to trouble yourself; we’ve already taken poison-resisting medicine.”

After waiting a quarter of an hour outside, Xu Qi’an stepped half a foot into the tomb chamber. There was no warning of danger, and the torch remained bright, giving him a sense of relief.

“I’ll take the lead; follow closely, and remember not to do anything unnecessary.”

The Houtu Gang members nodded vigorously.

By now, not only the sickly Boss but even the ordinary members had noticed Xu Qi’an’s low status.

Leading the way, probing for traps, and acting as the shield.

Such was the role of a crude martial artist.

This manoeuvre of mine ought to make me stand out, being the most useful, with even the Daoist relying on me... Xu Qi’an smirked.

At the same time, Xu Qi’an recalled details he’d previously overlooked.

Daoist Jinlian is indeed just a residual soul. I remember during the Sangpo case when we snuck into Earl Pingyuan Mansion and encountered Henghui being possessed by Shen Shu, the Daoist’s solution was to attack head-on with his spirit.

At the time, my ‘education level’ wasn’t high enough to realize it, but in retrospect, it seems odd. Where were his magical artefacts? His spells? His Golden Core?

Charging in with his spirit... It’s like taking off your pants and challenging someone with an iron gun with your flesh one. A suicidal move.

But if he’s a residual soul, everything makes sense. Even his fondness for cats makes sense; after all, neither human nor cat is his original body.

But how has a residual soul survived this long? The Daoist sects truly are experts in ghost-craft.

Though his inner monologue was rich, Xu Qi’an remained vigilant, attentive to any hidden threats in the surroundings.

Upon entering the main tomb chamber, the light from the five torches dispelled much of the darkness, gradually revealing the scene within.

The main tomb was vast; if one compared it to a room, Xu Qi’an and the others were now at the entrance. Yet even this entrance gave the impression of stepping into a temple.

Massive pillars, requiring several people to encircle, supported a ceiling whose height was indiscernible. The walls on either side were at least twenty *zhang* apart—meaning the tomb’s width was twenty *zhang* (60 metres).

Its depth was unknown and awaited exploration.

“According to the tomb’s layout, the centre must contain the tomb owner’s sarcophagus. I suggest we avoid it for now, circle along the walls, estimate the tomb’s

size, and see if we can uncover any valuable information.” The sickly Boss approached Daoist Jinlian and suggested.

A seasoned tomb raider indeed... But I’m the leader here, so why not consult with me? Xu Qi’an thought to himself.

“Reasonable,” Daoist Jinlian nodded.

Xu Qi’an led the group to the left and began their cautious exploration until they encountered a massive mural.

Before written language, murals were the only way to record events; even now, the tradition of “murals as records” persisted.

Xu Qi’an and Chu Yuanzhen, one in front of the other, raised their torches to illuminate the mural.

The mural depicted a terrifying giant serpent rampaging through a human city, its coiled body towering higher than the city walls. Its crimson eyes glowed ominously, its face fearsome.

At that moment, a Daoist riding a flying sword descended from the sky, slaying the giant serpent.

The emperor led his ministers out of the city to greet the Daoist, bowing low before him. The Daoist stood poised on his flying sword, hovering in mid-air and gazing down upon the emperor and his ministers below.

“Is such a large serpent a yao monster?” Hengyuan frowned.

Chu Yuanzhen shook his head, uncertain. Although he travelled far and wide, the sixty-year extermination of the Yao had caused the great monsters to disappear. Though yao did resurface twenty years ago at the Battle of Shanhai Pass, Chu Yuanzhen had been just a child then.

As for Xu Qi’an... he, along with the others, looked at Daoist Jinlian.

“There are indeed certain gifted members of the yao clan who can grow to vast sizes. But nothing quite as exaggerated as this. Furthermore, if you knew that yao condense demon cores at the fifth rank, you would not think the serpent on this mural is part of the yao,” Daoist Jinlian said with a lofty air, hands behind his back.

The three each had their own thoughts.

Xu Qi’an wondered, *So, fifth rank yao cultivate demon cores? Judging by the Daoist’s words, does that mean their bodies actually shrink after condensing a core? Or is it that yao cultivation doesn’t rely on physical size?*

Chu Yuanzhen, meanwhile, pondered what the serpent might be if not a yaoguai. A vague suspicion lurked in his mind.

Hengyuan’s thoughts were simpler: He couldn’t beat this serpent; it was a menace not yet able to be subdued by Buddhism.

Without holding back, Daoist Jinlian explained, “A massive size isn’t always an advantage. While it does provide a surge in power, it also reveals many vulnerabilities. In this world, beings known for their great size and formidable strength belong to the ancient gods and demons.

"But in the primeval age when these ancient mythological beings were active, humanity was still in its infancy, living in tribes. Thus, the serpent depicted here is likely a descendant of those ancient gods and demons, not a true one."

Chu Yuanzhen nodded slightly, finding the Daoist's words aligned with his suspicions.

"Even so, for this Daoist to have slain such a massive serpent, his power must have been extraordinary," Zhuangyuan Chu remarked.

The wall resembled an unfolding scroll as they walked along it, examining the scenes depicted.

In the next panel, they saw the emperor constructing a high platform to thank the Daoist. Together with his officials, he bowed in reverence.

"Isn't this the same scene we saw in the previous mural?" Xu Qi'an observed.

The scene of ministers worshipping at the high platform was identical to one on an earlier mural.

The next section, however, shocked them all: the Daoist with an indistinct face brandished his sword and killed the emperor, then donned the imperial robes and crown, effectively usurping the throne.

What the hell kind of story is this... Xu Qi'an stared in disbelief.

Chu Yuanzhen's mouth hung open, equally stunned by the Daoist's actions.

Daoist Jinlian furrowed his brows.

Master Hengyuan, looking troubled, commented, "A man of such attainment shouldn't crave power. What would be the purpose of an emperor's title to him?"

Before he finished speaking, Xu Qi'an and Chu Yuanzhen both chuckled, casting knowing glances at each other. Each realized the other had thought of Emperor Yuanjing.

Moving on, the mural depicted war, with black-armoured and white-armoured troops clashing. Behind the white-armoured soldiers stood the giant figure of the emperor—the usurping Daoist. Meanwhile, the black-armoured troops were without a figurehead.

The emperor's army suppressed the rebellion, yet he seemed uninterested in being a just ruler. Instead, he began to engage in debauchery.

The emperor was depicted high on a throne, a naked woman seated in his lap, and surrounded by more women, similarly unclothed.

Further behind him were more men and women, countless in number, all engaging in similar activities.

"This is just like the mural we saw outside," Xu Qi'an remarked, suddenly feeling a strange sense of *deja vu*.

This "multi-person activity" mural was identical to the previous one, though it lacked the qi-channelling anatomical diagrams. This mural's intent seemed to convey the emperor's descent into indulgence and a fanatical obsession with the Daoist dual cultivation arts.

But wait—he was originally a Daoist who seized the throne!

Xu Qi'an's mind raced with thoughts, then he heard Chu Yuanzhen murmur to Daoist Jinlian, "Daoist, this emperor must have had a profound connection with the Daoist dual cultivation sect."

The Zhuangyuan was clever; he meant to imply that this Daoist could be the founding patriarch of that school.

Chu Yuanzhen is clever, I was thinking just the same... Xu Qi'an nodded and looked to Daoist Jinlian.

"I don't know," the Daoist tersely replied.

They continued along the mural, the depiction of events revealing something astonishing.

Perhaps Heaven, too, found the emperor's depravity offensive, for one day, dark clouds gathered, and a bolt of divine lightning smote him down. The emperor died.

"A Daoist usurping the throne and indulging in debauchery, only to be struck down by divine lightning... it's all so very Goulán," commented the sickly Boss, shaking his head.

By "Goulán," he meant it was as though scripted for a performance. In this era, plays were often performed in Goulán brothels and similar establishments.

The faces of the Heaven and Earth Society members turned strange, for they thought of additional implications.

From a more logical standpoint, Xu Qi'an analysed, "Strange, there are some inconsistencies here."

Daoist Jinlian, Chu Yuanzhen, and the others, aware of Xu Qi'an's rare investigative talent, quieted their scattered thoughts to listen.

"If this tomb's owner was the emperor in the mural—the Daoist-turned-emperor—then this mural itself becomes very strange," Xu Qi'an said somberly.

"Even our most esteemed and sagacious emperor knows to alter historical records to cover his shortcomings. But here, we have such blatant depictions—is this mockery?"

Even Xu Ningyan chooses his words carefully, avoiding outright disrespect,

Most esteemed and sagacious emperor, altering historical records to cover his shortcomings... surely Xu Ningyan is too cautious, to be so careful to not leave a hint of "great disrespect" even in a situation like this. thought Chu Yuanzhen.

"Heaven smote him down, so, this tomb must be created by his servants. If they loathed him, wouldn't showing his sins be logical?" Hengyuan mused.

"Master, you might build a tomb for your enemy, but others may not," Xu Qi'an shook his head, adding, "If his descendants hated him, such an elaborate tomb would be out of the question. Conversely, such a tomb would not feature these scandalous scenes—unless the events depicted are unequivocally genuine."

The group nodded, accepting his reasoning. Chu Yuanzhen spoke in a low tone, “With such power, mere lightning could hardly kill a Daoist. Could this lightning carry another meaning?”

At this, Daoist Jinlian finally spoke, his words deliberate and heavy: “It was heavenly tribulation.”

“Heavenly tribulation?”

The others turned to look at Daoist Jinlian, for this was an unfamiliar term to them.

Daoist Jinlian nodded slowly. “In the Daoist hierarchy, second rank is known as ‘Transcending Tribulation.’ Surviving the Heavenly Tribulation allows one to become a first rank, a true ‘Earthly Immortal.’ Ha! This is not something that can be compared to the Heavenly Retribution of the Arcanist Prophets in the Sitianjian. The last head of the human sect was reduced to ashes by the Tribulation.”

So the Daoist second rank is “Transcending Tribulation”, and the first is “Earthly Immortal”. the members of the Heaven and Earth Society noted this down in their heads with joy.

Xu Qi’an smacked his forehead. “I remember now, Daoist. You once mentioned that damned head of the Earth Sect failed to cross the Tribulation, suffered demonic backlash, and fell to become a demon Daoist.”

After slaying Zilian, Daoist Jinlian had visited Xu Qi’an in the dead of night to have a frank and open discussion.

“So, this Emperor was of the second rank in Daoism, and at his peak, merely a hair’s breadth away from becoming an Earthly Immortal,” Chu Yuanzhen remarked.

Daoist Jinlian suddenly exhaled, relieved. “To die in the Tribulation, reduced to ashes...this tomb should be merely a symbolic burial, without much danger.”

Everyone else relaxed, with Xu Qi’an making a lighthearted comment, “Daoist, overly confident judgments often bring about the opposite outcome.”

Daoist Jinlian, you better not go jinxing us now.

Under Xu Qi’an’s lead, they approached the opposite side of the main tomb chamber, only to be disappointed at the lack of murals.

With the exploration of the main tomb complete, Xu Qi’an held a torch and led the group to the center, where they found a broad, dark passage.

The passage led straight to the central altar. Shallow pools of murky water lined both sides.

“Candles line both sides...”

Xu Qi’an raised his torch. Its orange glow illuminated the edges of the corridor, where candleholders, each as tall as a person, stood every ten paces, stretching all the way to the altar.

The candles on the stands were made of a blood-red wax that glistened like rubies.

“This seems to be tallow refined from the Red Dragons of the Eastern Sea. A single candle can burn for decades without going out,” Daoist Jinlian remarked, sniffing to confirm its composition.

While he spoke, Xu Qi'an and Chu Yuanzhen began lighting the candles, their flames illuminating the vast tomb with more light.

Xu Qi'an cautioned everyone to be wary of the pools, in case something sinister lay within. Meanwhile, he went on lighting the candles along the corridor.

Their torches wouldn't last much longer and would soon burn out; they needed to replace it with something else to continue their illumination.

As they approached the altar, Xu Qi'an abruptly stopped, his eyes widening at the sight of two lines of soldiers standing on the staircase leading up to the altar, gazing silently at the intruders.

Damn, scared me half to death... Xu Qi'an muttered to himself as he walked over to inspect the corpses, first listening for heartbeats, then examining the desiccated bodies.

"Just mummies. Don't touch anything and follow behind me."

After issuing his warning, he climbed the ninety-nine steps to the altar.

The first thing Xu Qi'an saw on the altar was a massive bronze sarcophagus. At each corner of the platform stood towering figures holding various weapons, unmoved by the passage of countless years.

Daoist Jinlian glanced at the bronze sarcophagus and then turned away to examine one of the mummies standing nearby.

This corpse was clad in a scale armour, wielding a purple-gold hammer, and wore a bronze mask, revealing only its eyes.

Each scale of the armour was connected with red thread and inscribed with strange symbols—both eerie and elegant.

"Is this a Daoist creation?" Chu Yuanzhen was also observing a mummy, though his had a tarnished bronze sword.

Daoist Jinlian examined the four mummies, scrutinizing their armor before murmuring, "Indeed, there are signs of Daoist influence. These ancient symbols... The one on the western side is associated with metal, while those on the south, north, and east govern fire, water, and wood, respectively."

"What about earth?" Xu Qi'an asked.

Daoist Jinlian didn't respond but directed his gaze at the bronze sarcophagus at the center.

"The center governs earth!" Chu Yuanzhen muttered. "What does this arrangement signify?"

"Is it for reincarnation?" suggested the wild arcanist, Gongyang Su, glancing at Zhong Li.

Zhong Li nodded. "All things in Heaven and Earth are born of the Five Elements. Ancient people believed that if a Five Elements formation was laid within a tomb, the deceased would one day be reborn from the earth."

Everyone listened intently, though Xu Qi'an suddenly felt a chill, saying, "This doesn't add up, Daoist. Didn't you say he perished in the Heavenly Tribulation, reduced to ashes? How could he be reborn? What's the purpose of this formation?"

Daoist Jinlian was momentarily stunned, his pupils narrowing as he whispered, "Let's go. The main tomb is explored; there's no need to linger."

Xu Qi'an nodded, about to give the order to retreat when a sigh echoed from within the bronze sarcophagus: "You've come..."

A chill shot down Xu Qi'an's spine, making his hair stand on end. He swallowed hard, glanced at the others, and noticed that, while their expressions were grave, they showed no fear.

Daoist Jinlian, seeing Xu Qi'an's ashen face, asked, "What's wrong?"

"I heard...from inside the sarcophagus..." Xu Qi'an stammered, each word escaping through gritted teeth:

"Someone...spoke."

Everyone felt a chill creep up their spines.

Zhong Li shivered and almost collapsed from fright.

Chu Yuanzhen's face turned pale as he said urgently, "Let's go, leave the main tomb, quickly..."

At that moment, they all displayed an intense survival instinct, wasting no time as they turned to leave.

Creak!

Just then, a rough, heavy grinding noise echoed from behind them.

It was the sound of the bronze sarcophagus being opened.

Chapter 309. Surprise! The Owner of the Tomb Appears

The moment the sarcophagus opened, an eerie, malevolent energy filled the chamber, and the temperature plummeted. The fire on their torches trembled violently.

Those who had just started to turn away froze in place—not by choice, but because their blood seemed to have solidified. Cloaked in a chilling air, they felt as if they were trapped in an icy realm, their bodies and blood locked in frost.

Had Daoist Jinlian been in cat form, his fur would certainly be standing on end.

Clang!

A deafening crash rang out as the coffin lid hit the ground. At that same moment, those who had their backs turned to the platform saw the helmeted corpse-guards on the steps below. Each one twisted their neck 180 degrees, their faces now staring silently at the group.

The sight was nothing short of terrifying, igniting overwhelming fear in the hearts of the tomb-raiding members of the Houtu Gang.

Crack... crack...

Xu Qi'an could hear the popping sound of bones, not far from him, as the armored figures standing at the four corners of the platform also began to stir.

He cautiously glanced at his companions to gauge their reactions.

Chu Yuanzhen's eyes were slightly widened, sweat beading on his forehead. The longsword on his back shivered now and then, as if eager to be drawn, but it was held back by an invisible force.

Master Hengyuan's facial muscles twitched, his jaw clenched as he struggled to break free from the force suppressing him, to no avail.

Daoist Jinlian's chest rose and fell, as if in a controlled breathing technique. He was calmest of all, though his eyes betrayed a hint of finality.

Is he preparing a last resort, ready to sacrifice himself to save us...? Xu Qi'an wondered, glancing at Zhong Li.

Lina remained unconscious on her back, making Zhong Li the most "relaxed" person here. Unfortunately, poor Zhong Li was visibly shaking beneath her hemp robes.

Is this her fault, or mine...? Probably both! Xu Qi'an mused grimly.

Then, a scene came unbidden to his mind: a withered hand, covered in green fur, emerging from the sarcophagus, pressing down on its edge.

A figure slowly rose within—a corpse dressed in a yellow robe, crowned in pure gold. The face, with skin stretched tight over the bone, had a nose that had long rotted away, leaving two dark holes.

The eyes were sunken, as though they might fall out at any moment.

The moment his senses captured the corpse's presence, Xu Qi'an's head felt as if a steel nail had driven through it. He nearly blacked out from the pain, the image shattering in his mind.

So, it is indeed that Daoist inside... a failed second rank, no wonder he's so powerful... Xu Qi'an's scalp tingled.

Silence hung in the air for several seconds before the first sound of footsteps echoed—the corpse had left the coffin and was slowly advancing toward them.

"Buzz... buzz..."

Chu Yuanzhen's longsword trembled violently on his back but still refused to leave its sheath.

Drip drip... Finally, beads of sweat rolled down Chu Yuanzhen's forehead.

Hengyuan's eyes bulged, veins pulsing on his temples and neck as he strained, his entire body convulsing in a futile attempt to break free from the suppression.

Zhong Li quivered like a frightened quail, her head drooping lower and lower.

A pungent odor filled the air, as several tomb raiders from the Houtu Gang lost control of their bowels in terror.

But who could blame them? Trapped in an ancient tomb thousands of years old, with something unholy emerging from the coffin and moving slowly toward them...

Just thinking about it sent a chill down the spine—let alone experiencing it firsthand.

Daoist Jinlian closed his eyes briefly, and when he opened them, they held a calm clarity. It seemed he had made up his mind.

But just then, the footsteps ceased, and a hoarse, guttural voice filled every corner of the tomb.

“Welcome back, my lord!”

The clinking of armor sounded in unison as the corpse-guards in the four corners of the platform and on the steps all knelt, worshipping someone in the crowd.

The sinister, horrifying energy rapidly receded, like a tide pulling back.

Everyone was astonished to find they could move again.

“Don’t act rashly!”

Daoist Jinlian transmitted his voice to the others, including the grave robbers.

Gulps and swallowing noises echoed as the tomb raiders, their legs trembling, held onto their senses. Experience had taught them to avoid panicked flight, which would only worsen things.

Yet, one thought struck them all: “My lord”?

Who is this “lord”? Judging by that corpse’s stance, it seemed their “lord” was here among them.

The tomb raiders exchanged wary glances, each one scrutinizing their companions in an effort to identify the “lord” the corpses were revering.

The Sickly Leader instinctively looked to Daoist Jinlian. Based on the wall carvings, the tomb’s master was a Daoist, and they just so happened to have a high-ranking Earth Sect master with them.

It was an easy conclusion to draw: this elderly Daoist must be the corpses’ “lord.”

So that’s his status... No wonder this Earth Sect master entered the tomb; he wasn’t solely here to rescue us. A true expert’s motives are beyond the understanding of simple folk like myself.

The sickly Boss trembled.

Arcanist Gongyang Su examined Daoist Jinlian with suspicion.

Sensing the altered attitude of their leaders, the Houtu Gang members immediately focused on the most mysterious figure in the group: Daoist Jinlian. And, curiously, they found themselves feeling more at ease.

The members of the Heaven and Earth Society stood close together, so for a moment, it was unclear whom the yellow-robed corpse was bowing to.

By force of habit, Chu Yuanzhen looked first at Daoist Jinlian.

Daoist Jinlian shook his head slightly.

Hengyuan was a martial monk, not of the Daoist sect, and despite his great talent, there was nothing particularly strange about him... Lina, a shaman of the Southern Marches, held no ties to this tomb... Miss Zhong of the Sitianjian can also be dismissed... but that means...?!

Chu Yuanzhen abruptly turned and stared fixedly at Xu Qi’an.

He recalled the reason why the group had entered the main tomb—it was due to three successive "coincidences" orchestrated by Xu Qi'an that they had arrived here.

*So it was not chance after all, but fate... Was Xu Ningyan truly the lord of the owner of this tomb?
*

This possibility surfaced in Chu Yuanzhen's mind, filling him with a dreadful awe. His body began to tremble involuntarily.

Is he kneeling to me? Calling me “my lord”? As the person in question, Xu Qi'an could sense that the corpse's “my lord” was directed at him.

He was momentarily overwhelmed with shock and confusion, unsure how to react.

For a second, he nearly blurted out, _Why are you calling me your lord?_

But rationality silenced him, since only two scenarios seemed possible here: First, that he truly was the yellow-robed corpse's lord, which would make his identity unimaginably terrifying.

Or second, that the corpse had mistakenly identified him.

Ignoring the first scenario for now, if it was the second, if the corpse had mistaken him for someone else, blurring out a question would surely expose him.

Then they'd all be annihilated.

Holding back his rising emotions, Xu Qi'an gazed expressionlessly at the yellow-robed corpse and said in a steady voice:

“Well done.”

The corpse lowered its head even further.

Witnessing this, the sickly Boss was stunned, his eyes widening. *So... so the "lord" the corpse had referred to wasn't the Daoist, but this sixth-rank warrior?*

This... this... but he's merely a warrior!

Likewise, Arcanist Gongyang Su couldn't mask his shock, immensely relieved that he hadn't impulsively activated his Qi-watching technique on these “allies.”

Had he done so, he'd likely have died on the spot, slain for seeing what should not be seen.

The Houtu Gang members held their breaths, dumbstruck as they watched Xu Qi'an.

The corpse lowered its head further, its hoarse voice tinged with puzzlement: “Why has my lord not ascended to immortality?”

Immortality?!

These words were like a thunderbolt in everyone's ears, from the weakest grave robbers to the seasoned Daoist Jinlian and, of course, Xu Qi'an himself. Waves of astonishment surged in their hearts.

Compared to the grave robbers who'd lost all control of their expressions, Xu Qi'an and his comrades were steadier, maintaining their composure.

Xu Qi'an, staring expressionless at the corpse, felt a tempest of thoughts swirling within.

Immortality? From my understanding, ‘immortality’ refers to transcending the ranks, right? An existence on par with Buddha, the Gu God, and the Warlock God.

Who was this yellow-robed corpse's lord, really?

After the age of gods and demons, only a handful of beings have attained beyond-rank. This tomb is over two thousand years old, yet could someone have achieved immortality within this time?

Or, maybe they failed to transcend, and this corpse simply doesn't know...

Fuck, who could've guessed that our next tomb would be this level of nightmare... It must be Zhong Li's fault — definitely her fault... What should I do? How am I supposed to respond?

The corpse's eyes, sunken deep in its eye sockets, shifted, as though scrutinizing Xu Qi'an.

Aware of the corpse's scrutiny, Xu Qi'an's gaze grew sharp, and he spoke slowly, “Are you teaching me how to do things?”

The corpse flinched, lowering its head with trembling humility. “Forgive me, my lord... Forgive me, my lord...”

With that, the corpse undid its yellow robe, revealing its withered body beneath. Its chest was sunken, the ribs protruding visibly beneath taut skin.

Additionally, Xu Qi'an noticed scorch marks on the corpse's body.

“Thud...”

Then, unexpectedly, the corpse performed an act no one could have anticipated—it raised a hand and pierced its own chest, extracting a piece of translucent jade, not a heart, but an intricately carved jade seal.

“Did my lord return to reclaim this seal? You left it with me, instructing me to nourish it well. I... I have safeguarded it all this time, and now, I present it to you, my lord.”

The corpse offered up the jade seal with reverence and asked in a hoarse, reverent tone, “And now... and now, what year is it?”

“The current dynasty is called Feng,” Xu Qi'an replied coolly.

“Feng...” the corpse murmured, bowing again. “And how many years have I slept?”

How should I know? Why don't you come with me, and I'll hand you over to the authorities to get an answer... Xu Qi'an mentally grumbled.

After a moment of thought, he chose not to answer the corpse directly and instead said coolly, “Time holds no meaning for those like us, does it?”

Brilliant response!

Daoist Jinlian silently commended him, impressed by Xu Ningyan's composure.

He subtly signaled Xu Qi'an, indicating it was time to find an exit.

Xu Qi'an caught on, extended his hand to receive the jade seal, and said, “Return to your slumber.”

There was no need for further words. First, because speaking too much could raise suspicions, and second, he was role-playing, and as the lord, retrieving his property required no explanation.

He didn't actually want the jade seal, but from the corpse's reaction, it seemed vitally important. Refusing it might arouse suspicion.

The jade felt firm and warm, like polished stone. As he turned it discreetly, he glimpsed the words inscribed on its base. But before he could make them out fully, the jade crumbled into fine white dust, slipping through his fingers.

Then, a surge of indescribable power, like a tidal wave, traveled up his arm and coursed into his body.

He felt his blood rush to his head, inducing a powerful dizziness. It was as if something within him was awakening.

"You are not my lord..."

The corpse jerked its head up, its eyes burning with a rising blood-red glow.

A hoarse, seething voice echoed through the tomb chamber, brimming with killing intent.

"Run!"

Daoist Jinlian was the first to react, sweeping his sleeve to conjure a powerful gust, hurtling the Houtu Gang's grave robbers and Chu Yuanzhen off the high platform and toward the main tomb's exit.

At the same time, he grabbed Xu Qi'an by the shoulder, attempting to throw him down to safety.

He would remain behind, and face the wrath of the risen corpse.

But Xu Qi'an shrugged off his hand, pressed his palm against Jinlian's chest, and muttered, "Daoist, get them out of here.

"I'll stay."

Boom!

A blast of force surged from his palm, propelling Daoist Jinlian back.

As he flew, Daoist Jinlian saw the corpse seize Xu Qi'an by the neck, lifting him high in the air. The armored guardians on each corner of the platform charged forward, weapons raised, prepared to shred the impostor to pieces.

"Xu Qi'an..." murmured Daoist Jinlian.

Chapter 310. Immortal Form

Daoist Jinlian spared no further glance. As he landed, he kicked back Hengyuan, who was about to turn around to help, and shouted, "Chu Yuanzhen, take Hengyuan and go!

"The rest of you, evacuate the main tomb immediately."

With that, he turned and whipped up a gust of wind, repelling the oncoming spears. These weapons, infused with an eerie aura, shattered upon impact, the malevolent energy gnawing at Daoist Jinlian's body.

His face suddenly went pale, and his flesh-and-blood body nearly transformed into a spectral entity on the spot.

Taking advantage of this opening, the Houtu Gang members, along with Chu Yuanzhen and Zhong Li, escaped from the main tomb. Hengyuan, whose meridians had been forcefully sealed by Chu Yuanzhen in a surprise attack, was forcibly taken along.

Daoist Jinlian no longer lingered in battle. With a flicker of his shadow, he vanished instantly.

Bang!

The stone doors of the main tomb slammed shut.

...

“You are not my Lord—how dare you seize my Lord’s fate?”

The corpse in the yellow robe raised both arms, lifting Xu Qi’an high into the air, exhaling a dense, deathly breath from its dark, purplish mouth.

The temperature in the tomb plummeted; frost crept over the platform and stone steps. Amid the crackling sounds, the puddles along the corridor froze solid.

A golden lustre appeared on Xu Qi’an’s brow, quickly spreading across his face and trickling down. But his neck, clutched tightly by the corpse, blocked the golden hue, preventing it from covering his body and activating his Indestructible Vajra Body.

“Lowly ant! You dare steal my Lord’s fate? I will make sure you suffer for eternity—consume your flesh, gnaw your bones, and suppress your soul here in this tomb.

“Lifetime after lifetime, you shall know only torment!”

The corpse’s anger surged, its mouth suddenly gaping wide, splitting at the corners to reveal rows of sharp, jagged fangs. It lunged at Xu Qi’an’s neck.

Clang!

The sound of iron meeting steel reverberated as teeth that could easily shatter forged metal failed to pierce Xu Qi’an’s flesh. Somehow, the golden lustre had managed to break past the corpse’s grip and spread over his neck, turning it a radiant, golden hue.

The golden gleam surged, covering Xu Qi’an from head to toe.

A resplendent, deity-like golden figure emerged, illuminating every corner of the main tomb.

It was as if a god had descended.

“Lowly monster... you dare to show such impudence in front of this monk!”

The voice began as Xu Qi’an’s but morphed halfway, distinctly belonging to someone else.

Like a heavenly avatar, Xu Qi’an stretched out his hand and slowly pried open the corpse’s fingers, not with brute force but with an almost deliberate, intimidating slowness.

The corpse’s arms trembled; despite its formidable strength, it was unable to match his.

Clang!

Its other hand shot toward Xu Qi'an's chest, but it, too, failed to breach the golden body's defense. The corpse clenched its fist, shifting from a thrust to a blow. In a deafening explosion of power, it sent Xu Qi'an flying.

“Roar...”

The corpse's mouth widened, transforming into a cavernous, insatiable vortex. Four corpses stationed at the platform's corners were sucked into the bloodthirsty maw, tripping over each other as they were devoured.

Then came the ranks of ghostly soldiers on the steps, each yanked into the mouth, whether willing or not.

With resounding crunches, the corpse's body expanded, its blackened claws extending, and dried, wasted flesh began to swell. Jagged armour-like chitin emerged, encasing it entirely.

Dark green spines erupted from its head.

The corpse, now transformed into a massive, ten-foot-tall humanoid monster, stood atop the platform, raising its head to gaze at the dazzling figure hovering in mid-air. Its gravelly voice resounded:

“A puny insect, how could you seize my Lord's fate... it turns out you harbour a martial artist's soul inside you. It seems I've slumbered for too long, that such a powerful body could appear in this era.”

“It's a Buddhist Golden Body,” Monk Shenshu responded.

“Buddhist?” The creature tilted its head, its fierce gaze scrutinising the golden form.

“Oh, you don't know of Buddhism. It seems your existence is from an age far too ancient,” Shenshu replied coolly. “As it happens, I detest them.”

A wave of golden energy burst forth mid-air as he plummeted down like a meteor.

Boom!

Their palms clashed on the platform, and the ancient structure—standing for countless eons—cracked, one fissure after another snaking outward.

Finally, with a resounding crash, it collapsed.

The golden figure and the corpse plummeted together. The corpse headbutted the golden figure's brow, sending sparks of golden light scattering and leaving it momentarily dazed.

Boom, boom, boom!

The corpse struck with such speed that its fists blurred, continuously hammering Xu Qi'an's chest and forehead, producing an explosion of golden fragments.

Xu Qi'an clenched the corpse's wrists, his voice wincing. “Ouch... Ouch! Owwww! Master...”

Then, in a self-assured tone, he continued, “Hmm, this spectre is formidable indeed. Now, I shall counterattack...”

As soon as he finished, the corpse launched a kick, sending him flying upward.

The golden glow streaked far away, colliding with the tomb's ceiling with a thunderous crash, dislodging chunks of stone that crumbled and fell.

The corpse, standing amid the rubble, looked up at the ceiling, its knees bending in a stance of gathering force.

Whoosh!

A piercing whistle filled the air as a golden meteor once again hurtled down.

Prepared this time, the corpse punched skyward, meeting the descending golden figure.

In the stillness that followed, shattered stone and murky water surged upwards. Shockwaves rippled outward, battering the walls of the tomb, creating fractures from which boulders tumbled.

The corpse's feet sunk deep into the ground. The golden figure seized the opportunity to strike, hammering it into the stone below.

"Master, take its head off!" Xu Qi'an shouted.

The golden form was about to advance when the corpse's gaping maw twisted, forming a vortex that devoured all in its path.

The golden lustre dimmed, siphoned by the swirling darkness.

In such a dire situation, the golden figure summoned the black-gold sabre from the murky water, striking the corpse on the side of its face with a metallic clang, causing its head to wobble.

Seizing the opening, the golden figure escaped the vortex's pull and delivered a sweeping kick to the back of the creature's head, shattering the bone-like scales there in a spray of golden fragments.

Bang, bang, bang!

A flurry of flying kicks struck the back of the zombie's skull in quick succession, bursting into shockwaves as the chitinous armour shattered and splintered.

At that moment, Xu Qi'an sensed a vision flash through his mind: an ancient, rusted sword rising from the murky water, aiming to stab him in the back.

Without a second thought, he retracted his kick and rolled to the side.

A sharp whistle rang out, and the ancient sword, missing its mark, was now clutched in the zombie's hand. Though still corroded and worn, it radiated an aura of deathly energy that made the golden glow between Xu Qi'an's brows pulsate in alarm.

"This is my Lord's artifact," the zombie rasped, voice low and hoarse. "It has absorbed the Yin energy of this tomb for countless years—perfect for shattering your powerful Yang-protective art."

As he spoke, strands of blackened Yin energy seeped from the putrid water, pooling into his body to restore the shattered chitin.

What do we do? The tomb was built atop a feng-shui confluence, effectively forming a natural formation that gave the zombie an overwhelming advantage... While the monk Shenshu controlled his body, Xu Qi'an's mind remained alert, instinctively analysing the enemy's weaknesses.

He pondered how he might handle such a creature if it were just him.

With palms pressed together, Shenshu's voice rang out, calm and compassionate: "Lay down your butcher's knife; turn your head and see the shore."^[1]

The voice bore an irresistible power; the zombie's grip on the sword began to falter as if it could no longer hold the weapon steady. Both hands now clutched the hilt, arms trembling.

Seizing the pause, the golden form rose into the air, hovering above the zombie. His hands flew through a rapid series of formations.

A "卐" ^[2] symbol, full of metallic energy, formed above the golden figure's head, joined by more that spread out in a circular array, with the shining golden body at its centre.

The golden figure closed its eyes, hands still weaving, moving so quickly they left afterimages.

The "卐" symbols shone brighter, emitting a searing golden radiance that illuminated every corner of the burial chamber with a brilliant golden halo.

Then, the movements ceased, hands pressed together in a final seal.

Boom!

The air rumbled with a heavy shockwave as a golden pillar of light shot from the array, enveloping the yellow-robed zombie.

Hisss...

Black smoke rose as if water had been poured onto hot oil, and the creature shrieked in agony within the searing light.

As the golden light faded, Shenshu's serene voice echoed, "Forsake wrath, forsake anger, lay down your arms."

The light dispersed, leaving the zombie's body scorched, its chitin cracked, revealing dark, necrotic flesh.

But he showed no trace of anger or intent to kill, feeling only an inexplicable urge to make peace and resolve matters amicably.

Shenshu, however, had no such inclination. Descending from the sky, he delivered a devastating palm strike to the zombie's head.

His palm slammed down with a loud blast, obliterating the chitin, exposing the blackened, pulsating brain beneath.

In that instant, clarity returned to the zombie's eyes, breaking free of the binding force. With a harsh grinding sound, his skull regenerated at a tremendous rate, his hand closing around the bronze sword as it burst from the murky water.

The blade flashed upward.

Thud... The ancient bronze sword, said to be his Lord's, easily pierced Shenshu's indestructible golden body, leaving a deep wound in his chest.

But the blood that flowed wasn't golden or red—it was pitch-black, inky as night.

I've been poisoned?! Xu Qi'an's heart sank, as he felt waves of dizziness cloud his mind.

The two powerful forms clashed furiously within the echoing tomb, rubble cascading, and waves of dirty water roiling. The entire tomb quaked and trembled from the force of their combat.

Throughout the battle, Shenshu depleted the zombie's Yin energy with Buddhist incantations, while the zombie wielded the bronze sword to corrode Shenshu's golden body.

The difference lay in that this was the zombie's domain—a tomb steeped in dense Yin energy—while Shenshu, unable to draw power from his surroundings, fought like a castle built on sand.

“You cannot defeat me. Why don't you just flee?” The zombie stabbed his sword deep into the golden figure's chest, his voice booming like thunder.

“As you have awakened, if you do not die, every living creature nearby will suffer,” replied Shenshu.

“I don't wish to destroy this tomb. Return the Lord's fate to me, and I shall let you all go.”

“It cannot be returned,” Shenshu replied with a hint of regret.

“Then go to hell!”

Just as the zombie moved to obliterate his opponent's internal organs, a drumming sound reverberated through the tomb.

Boom, boom. Boom, boom. Boom, boom!

The drumming grew louder, faster, faster...

The zombie suddenly felt his arm trembling—it was the other's heartbeat, pounding fiercely.

When the heartbeat reached a feverish pitch, a flame-like demonic mark ignited between Xu Qi'an's brows, engulfed by jet-black flames.

His body began to swell, his healthy bronze skin darkening to an ominous black, with bulging veins that looked ready to tear through his flesh.

In mere seconds, he transformed from a man into a monster.

The monster stretched, his body creaking, his face tilting back in pure satisfaction. “Ahhh... this feels good...”

He raised his blackened hand, effortlessly crushing the sword.

Fuck, I almost forgot about Shenshu's true form... thought Xu Qi'an with a shiver.

For so long, Shenshu had appeared to him as a gentle monk, and he had almost forgotten the demon-like figure that had taken over Henghui—the memory of that ghastly, blackened, severed hand filled with evil and horror.

“To tell the truth, I hate revealing my immortal form. It consumes too much energy, forcing me to constantly feed on the blood and flesh of living beings to sustain myself. But I detest slaughter—absolutely detest it.”

Shenshu’s voice was calm, cold, his gaze piercing the zombie with the indifference of an ancient monarch reborn—cold, confident, and utterly disdainful.

“What sort of person are you? No, what sort of monster are you?” the zombie roared, trembling with visible fear, his tone barely masking his terror.

Shenshu’s response was a steady hand that descended toward the zombie’s head, pressing down with unstoppable force.

The zombie recoiled, unwilling to accept his fate without a fight.

But Shenshu seemed to ignore the distance, his hand moving slowly but inexorably, pressing onto the zombie’s head, exerting a silent power.

Boom!

With a muffled explosion of Qi, the corpse’s eyes went blank. Its malevolent form collapsed limply, as though its bones could no longer support it, and it crumbled helplessly to the ground.

“Lord... I... I can’t wait for you any longer...” it muttered, voice thick with reluctance.

Monk Shenshu pressed a drop of blood from his fingertip and leaned down to trace a reverse sauwastika on the corpse’s forehead.

A golden light flashed briefly and then settled deep into the corpse’s body, sealing it from any chance of movement.

Sensing the change within, the corpse, now fully aware of its entrapment, looked blankly before asking in a low, angry voice, “Why don’t you kill me?”

Monk Shenshu, no longer able to sustain his indestructible form, allowed the fiery mark to dissipate, his darkened skin fading back to the form of Xu Qi’an.

The whole transformation had taken only a few seconds.

With calm benevolence, Monk Shenshu said, “Killing you would be no challenge; you’re merely an abandoned husk.

“Who is your Lord?”

...

They fled the burial chamber, passing through corridors and returning to the labyrinth.

Hearing no sounds of vengeful spirits behind them, the group felt a palpable relief. Chu Yuanzhen solemnly unlocked Hengyuan from his entrapment.

Thud!

The burly monk's fist, like a sledgehammer, crashed into Chu Yuanzhen's face. Without a word, he turned to head back toward the main tomb.

Daoist Jinlian stopped him, voice heavy. "You're going back to die?"

Hengyuan's face was expressionless as he quietly replied, "Move aside!"

Jinlian's complexion was ashen, his gaze cloudy, clearly in a disturbed state. He shook his head, saying, "We're already in the labyrinth; you can't find your way back."

Hengyuan clenched his fist, veins bulging on his hand, his voice tight. "Why did you drag me out here? I owed him my life; I owed him my life..."

His voice, once heavy with bitterness, broke into a sob.

No one had anticipated that the stoic warrior monk would suddenly tear up.

"Daoist, you shouldn't have brought him here." Hengyuan shook his head slowly.

"When we joined the Heaven and Earth Society, we vowed to help each other. But this had nothing to do with Sir Xu; he wasn't one of us. You had no right to involve him.

"He's always been like this, in every crisis, always thinking of others before himself, sacrificing himself for others. But you can't take his kindness as some sort of obligation.

"Now that Number Five is found, not a single member of the Heaven and Earth Society is missing. But what face do we have to go back with?

"Daoist Jinlian, I'm so deeply, deeply disappointed in you."

In the capital, when Hengyuan had learned through the fragments of the Book of the Earth that Xu Qi'an had fallen in Yunzhou, he had crushed the prayer beads that had accompanied him for years as he meditated.

But that was a matter far away, and beyond sorrow, he could do nothing.

This time was different. He had been part of the mission, he had witnessed everyone abandoning Xu Qi'an, and a wave of grief and fury overwhelmed him.

It made Hengyuan question his sense of self and his comrades.

Daoist Jinlian hesitated, wanting to explain. Yet as he thought of the way Xu Qi'an had pushed him back with a final shove, he held his silence.

Chu Yuanzhen watched the argument between the two, dejected and listless, looking nothing like that gallant swordsman in azure. He seemed more a defeated stray.

The image of Xu Qi'an staying back in the tomb to cover their escape replayed in his mind.

Though he had not known Xu Qi'an for long, he had come to admire the Silver Gong. Before they had even met, he had heard much about him from within the Heaven and Earth Society's messages.

Hengyuan described him as a man of great kindness; Number One said he was a lover of women, and Li Miaozen spoke of him as a man who overlooked the small and held to the grand, a true knight.

But to Chu Yuanzhen, Xu Qi'an was a friend worth having—someone of worthy character and conviction.

For a person like that to have stayed behind to save everyone, putting duty above all else—this was just like something he would do. How were they ever going to answer to Number Three... Chu Yuanzhen's eyes burned, his vision growing blurry.

"He saved my life. I told myself I would repay him..." Hengyuan's face twisted, his voice a guttural mutter, "What right do I have to go on living? What right do I have to go on living..."

"This isn't good—his Buddhist heart is fracturing." Daoist Jinlian's face changed as he pressed his fingers to Hengyuan's brow, soothing his turbulent mind and helping him find peace.

Hengyuan's gaze cleared somewhat as he shoved Daoist Jinlian's hand away roughly.

"Hengyuan, things aren't as you believe." Daoist Jinlian's tone was firm. "In truth, Xu Qi'an, he is—"

He was about to reveal that Xu Ningyan was Number Three, a fellow holder of the Book of the Earth fragment and a member of the Heaven and Earth Society.

At that moment, the entire underground palace began to quake, rocks crashing down from the vaulted ceiling.

Daoist Jinlian's voice abruptly ceased, and he looked up with a frown. "The tomb is collapsing."

For some unknown reason, the entire structure seemed on the verge of destruction.

Zhong Li suddenly said, "The tomb's mechanisms have failed. The formations are breaking down... We... we can leave..."

Then, she handed the unconscious Lina to Hengyuan. "Help me carry her; take her out."

A massive boulder tumbled down straight toward Zhong Li and Lina.

"Watch out!"

The impulse to save them overwhelmed his sorrow as Hengyuan pulled the two young women to safety, taking Number Five over his shoulder. In a low voice, he said, "Alright, I'll get her out."

With Zhong Li's curse of misfortune, staying behind while the tomb collapsed would indeed be unwise.

The group fled, miraculously avoiding further disorientation. Amidst the raining debris, they made their way back to the burial chamber that connected to the tunnel.

With a sense of accomplishment, Hengyuan exhaled and halted, glancing back—only to see that Zhong Li was missing.

She... she went back... Hengyuan froze in place, his heart suddenly pierced with an excruciating sense of anguish.